

華胥の幽夢

小野由美

十二國記

white
heart



Dreaming of Paradise

A Twelve Kingdoms novel

by

Fuyumi Ono

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Winter Splendor



hen Taiki left the building, the Imperial Palace looked completely different.

He stopped in the promenade, looked around and blinked several times. The building itself had not changed. Neither had the great array of magnificent pavilions or the gardens and courtyards. The white walls and indigo tile roofs, the officials passing back and forth—it was the same scene as always.

But now they all seemed to glow with a wan, inner light. Everything was wrapped in a soft luster, as if a thin gauze was draped across the unusually clear winter sky. The blue was faded, the sun a stained smear of white, the shadows falling at Taiki's feet a washed-out gray.

And yet the scene before him was brighter than what he would see at noonday.

This was different than fog, but something like a fog suffused the surroundings. The light was tinged with something too faint and too fine to see—or at least that's how it felt to Taiki.

Behind him, Seirai asked, "Is something the matter?"

Seirai had accompanied him from the main palace. Taiki glanced over his shoulder. He gestured at the expansive gardens as if to say, *How does one account for this?*

"Ah, yes." Seirai smiled and looked up at the sky. "Strange indeed. A white sun."

Seirai was Taiki's regent. He was also the prime minister of Zui Province, home to the capital of the Kingdom of Tai. It was common practice to assign a regent to a young Saiho like Taiki. The regent always remained close by and attended to everything that needed attending to, from the Saiho's private life to government

affairs. At the same time, he served as Taiki's tutor.

"A white sun?"

"That's what weather like this is called. It is clear below as well." As Taiki looked no more enlightened by this explanation he added, "The storms beneath the Sea of Clouds have abated for a spell. The sunlight is reflecting off the snow covering the world below."

"Wow."

Taiki gazed again at the landscape shrouded in white light. It looked like rays of the sun streaming through the paper panes of a *shouji* door. It reminded him of waking up on a clear morning back in Japan, a place that seemed like a distant, foreign world to him now. He couldn't help feeling a brief pang of homesickness.

"There can't be a cloud in the sky and the weather must be perfect. It doesn't happen very often. We struck the jackpot today."

"Do you think the world below is visible from here?"

"Shall we go see if it is?"

Taiki answered with an enthusiastic nod. The Imperial Palace itself appeared like an island floating in the midst of the ocean. The world below should be visible through the enveloping Sea of Clouds, but come winter, that view disappeared as well as the storm clouds gathered and blocked the view.

Seirai laughed and reached out his hand. Taiki seized his regent's warm hand and looked up at him. "If we don't hurry, the clouds will probably close in again."

As if taking this information into account, Seirai smiled. "Well, I know a shortcut. Let's go."

Taiki agreed delightedly. He had a particular fondness for his regent's "shortcuts." Seirai made liberal use of the paths and alleyways otherwise reserved for the lower-ranked civil servants, at times even cutting through a shuttered palace or an official's courtyard.

Taiki was always impressed and curious that the Imperial Palace contained such places. All the more fun was ducking into the shadows whenever somebody crossed their paths, so as not to catch the odd bureaucrat by surprise.

This day as well, holding onto Seirai's hand, they stole through the nooks and crannies of the government offices, negotiating yet another "shortcut." Sneaking beneath the balcony of a stately manse, they emerged into a courtyard. A number of people were exiting a nearby building in the company of several kijuu.

"Taiho—" said a voice.

The surprised speaker came to a halt. Taiki quickly hid himself and came face to face with Seirai.

"We've been found out!"

"Well, I guess we've got no choice but to surrender peacefully and accept what we've got coming."

Grinning, Taiki and Seirai emerged from the thicket. Several armor-wearing soldiers appeared to be waiting for them on the adjacent cobblestones. Taiki recognized Ganchou and Asen of the Palace Guard and their kijuu. The one woman among them was Risai, general of the Zui Provincial Guard. As always, she was with Hien, her kijuu.

Because Senkaku of the Ministry of Earth was with them, they probably weren't going on military maneuvers. Behind them was Taiki's liege, all the more conspicuous thanks to his shimmering gray hair and ruby eyes and bright smile.

"The Taiho does have the habit of turning up in the most unexpected places at the most unexpected times." At the head of the troop, Risai bowed to him and grinned broadly.

Taiki answered, "It's the weird weather. We were wondering if we could see the world below and came to look at the Sea of Clouds. Can I pet Hien?"

"Of course," Risai answered readily. "I'm sorry to have to say it, Taiho, but the skies being as they are, it is unlikely the Sea of Clouds will afford you much of a view."

Stroking Hien's fur, Taiki tilted his head to the side. "But there aren't any clouds, right?"

"Yes. Which means that the sunlight reflecting off the world below is all too blinding."

Taiki looked at Seirai with a disbelieving expression. Seirai averted his gaze, biting his lip to keep the mischievous smile from his mouth.

All of a sudden, Ganchou's big, boulder-like frame shook with orotund laughter. "Seems like Seirai here's been pulling a leg or two."

Hien whimpered in consolation as Taiki scratched the scruff of his neck. He sighed. "Seirai's a big meanie. Before, when I asked him what a 'prime minister' was, he said it was the person in charge of the Imperial babysitting services. Gyousou-sama thought it was a very funny joke."

"Considering the tongue-lashing he caught from His Highness afterwards," Asen laughed, "you could say that he was the one injured on the play."

Taiki smiled as well. Seirai chuckled.

Asen had long been a general in the Palace Guard, as had Gyousou before his recent elevation, and they had enjoyed a close relationship. Risai was on good terms with Gyousou as well. Ganchou and Seirai had been Gyousou's right-hand men. That special air of comity that attends any group of good friends surrounded them.

Laughing, Seirai urged Taiki forward. "Let's get out of here before His Highness boxes my ears. We probably won't be able to see the world below, but it is still a remarkable sight. The Sea of Clouds glows with a beautiful white light."

"While we're at it, can we go to the Forbidden Gate and see what it's like down there?"

They'd only come as far as the inner part of the Naiden. Going through the building Risai and the others had come from would take them to the Forbidden Gate.

Seirai raised an eyebrow. "It's pretty darned cold down there. A small guy like the Taiho would get froze through in no time at all."

"Just for a little while," said Taiki.

Gyousou stepped forward. He was the King of Tai and Taiki's liege. "I'll go with you."

Taiki was delighted, but at the same time felt himself a burden. The coronation

had only recently taken place and the King was a busy man. He really didn't have the time to spend escorting Taiki around.

"You must have other things to do."

"Risai and the others could probably use the time to stable their kijuu. And I needed to see you anyway."

Encouraged by Gyousou's smile, Taiki's face as well split into a wide grin. Being around his incomparable liege always made him happy. He glanced over his shoulder at Seirai.

I'll be waiting here, Seirai's grin and upturned eyes answered him.

Chapter 2

Taiki said, "I'm sorry about taking you away from your work like this."

"Not a problem," Gyousou said with a smile and a quick backward glance.

He headed toward a set of doors that had just been opened. Beyond the doors was a large window. Beyond the window, the Sea of Clouds reached out to the horizon. Having been born in another world, this ocean above the sky remained for Taiki a strange and peculiar phenomenon.

He heard the soft murmur of waves. The sea was usually shrouded in a gray gloom, but today it glowed white. The surface of the water was the color of white pearls, glowing faintly as lit by lights lining the ocean floor.

With an excited cry, Taiki dashed to the window. Gyousou placed a thick coat across his shoulders. "You'd better wear this. It's freezing outside."

"But won't you get cold?"

"You don't need to worry about me."

Taiki couldn't help feeling a little guilty, but his delight in Gyousou's concern for him more than made up the difference. Running to catch up with Gyousou as he strode toward the staircase, he got tangled up in the long sleeves and was sent sprawling. Gyousou stopped and scooped him up in his arms, wrapping the long coat around him in a single motion.

"Still light as a feather."

"That's 'cause I'm a kirin, I think."

Taiki's true inner nature—which he hadn't truly grasped himself—was not human. A species of creature known as a kirin, his unique steel-black hair was actually a mane. And belonging to the genus of flying pegasi, his body was lightly built.

"Indeed," Gyousou said.

Bearing Taiki on his shoulders, he continued down the white stone stairway tucked into a corner of the room. The staircase was by no means short, but with every step they descended ten or twenty times that height in actual distance.

Oddities like this could be found throughout the Imperial Palace. Though amazed at first, Taiki had bit by bit become accustomed to such things. There were beasts—not birds—that soared through the air, a sea above the sky, people with every imaginable color of hair and eyes.

That was just the kind of world this was.

The broad, winding staircase exited onto a large hall. A huge set of doors were set into the front of the room. The guards on either side recognized Gyousou and Taiki and opened the gates.

Halfway through the gates, the needle-like wind and sharp rays of the sun seemed to press against them.

The Forbidden Gate was located halfway up the side of Mt. Ryou'un. It was set into an immense cave located on a high promontory adjacent to the Sea of Clouds. The unenclosed side of the wide, triangular terrace in front of the gate fell away into open space as if it had been interrupted mid-construction.

Taiki slipped out of Gyousou's arms. Firmly clasping his hand, he peered over the edge. The snow-covered city of Kouki spread out below them. The steep serrations of the surrounding peaks shimmered silver-white against the brilliant blue sky.

"It's pretty," he murmured.

The minute he opened his mouth, the bitterly cold air stung at the back of his throat and he coughed reflexively. In the time it had taken to cross the terrace from the Forbidden Gate, his skin was already growing numb. He could feel his eyelids freezing. The brilliance and cold made for an almost painful combination.

"It really is cold." The chill was already making it difficult to talk normally.

Gyousou nodded. "Tai is a kingdom of the far north. The winters come early here, as do the snows. The towns and villages are closed in by the snow. Clear

days like this are few and far between. Located here in the heavens, the Imperial Palace mostly escapes the weather. But the ordinary people have find ways to live amidst all this cold."

"It must be tough."

"Loose your shelter and you'll freeze in no time. Once the hills and valleys get covered with snow and the ground freezes, there's no use digging for roots and tubers either. If stores laid up during the fall don't last the winter, you'll starve. And yet the harvest all depends on the weather. How well you prepare for the winter makes the difference between life and death. That's the kind of kingdom this is."

Taiki stared down wordlessly at the glittering city, white and icy and inorganic.

"We leaders of men who stand and stare like this fancy ourselves beautiful and undefiled, but at the same time we will act with ruthless inhumanity. Never forget that."

"Yes," Taiki responded with a nod, feeling a kind of quiet gravity replacing his giddiness.

Before long, hurried along by a gentle hand at his back, they returned to the Forbidden Gate. The grave mood didn't lift even after they had left the cold behind. The chill remained for a while in his hands and feet, his fingers and toes almost painfully numb. But that wasn't the only reason for the lump of ice that seemed to sit in the pit of his stomach.

"It was pretty cold out there, wasn't it?" Gyousou added in a more cheerful voice, "How someplace warmer?"

"Someplace warmer?" Taiki asked quizzically.

"Someplace warm where there's no snow and the flowers are blooming."

"But it's winter, isn't it?"

Gyousou leaned over and placed his hands on Taiki's shoulders and smiled reassuringly. "I'd like you to do a favor for me."

This statement only left Taiki more confused. He couldn't see the connection between "a warm place" and "a favor."

"I'd like you to go to Ren."

"Ren? The Kingdom of Ren? Way to the south?"

Gyousou nodded. "The Ren Taiho was a great help to you at Mt. Hou. I think it would be a good idea to thank her and let her know that the ship of state here in Tai is back on an even keel. But I simply do not have the time to spare."

"So you want me to go instead?"

"Under normal circumstances, a ceremonial mission would have been dispatched immediately following the coronation. But when we inquired, it seemed that Ren had been having some political difficulties. Though the disturbances had been brought under control, they found themselves a bit too preoccupied and asked to put things off for the time being. Things have apparently settled down, and so now I'd like you to pay a visit to the Royal Ren as my representative."

"By myself?" Taiki said a bit hesitantly.

"You'll have plenty of company, of course. I know it's a big job, but how about it?"

Chapter 3

Gyousou returned to the business he had at hand. Taiki trudged back to where Seirai was waiting for him in the courtyard. Seirai saw him and hurried over. He noticed Taiki's changed attitude at once.

"What happened?"

"It looks like I'm being sent to Ren."

Seirai nodded knowingly. "Ah, I was wondering when that subject was going to come up."

"You knew?"

"His Highness discussed the matter with me. He wondered if it might be too great a burden to place upon you at this time. I said that it'd be a piece of cake for a Taiho like you." He peered more closely at Taiki. "Would you perchance harbor any reservations about going to Ren?"

Taiki shook his head. He really didn't have a problem with going to Ren, and didn't want anybody getting the idea that he might.

"But you must have a few concerns or worries."

Taiki looked down at his feet. "No, that's not it."

"It is a big responsibility. And yet Gyousou-sama won't be there with you."

Seirai had served under Gyousou in the Palace Guard, and now and then referred to him as he once had.

"Ren is very far away. It's going to take a lot of time to go there, won't it?"

"Yes, it will. Using kijuu, going there and coming straight back will take a month at the least. Even at top speed, you're not likely to make it back for the New Year celebrations."

"Would it be okay if I didn't go?"

"This is normally the kind of thing that the Taiho and the King would do together. All the more reason, His Highness believes, to make use of this opportunity to employ you as an ambassador. With all the festivals going on right now there won't be so many pressing engagements on your schedule. Look, the same thing goes for our friends in Ren. At any other time of year, we'd just be getting in the way."

"I guess so."

"Or perhaps the thought of being separated from Gyousou-sama makes you a little lonely?"

Taiki glanced up at Seirai and Seirai nodded to himself. "Yes, Gyousou-sama has been very wrapped up in his work."

In fact, Gyousou had been in a frenzy of activity of late. He'd been that way from before the Winter Solstice, and things hadn't changed since. After Seirai was appointed regent, they no longer attended the afternoon planning meetings together. There was no guarantee they'd eat together either. Exchanging a few words with Gyousou before the Privy Council was often the best Taiki could hope for.

"There's never any time to sit around and chat. And on top of that, being sent on a long journey must seem awfully disheartening."

"Yeah."

Taiki well knew that Gyousou was busy, but he couldn't help feeling apprehensive, that he'd done something to tick him off. Back in his home town in Japan, he'd certainly seemed to do that to everybody around him.

For the most part, Taiki was a child who could never measure up to people's expectations. He knew what everybody around him expected, but he didn't know how to give it to them. Doing what was good in his eyes was only apt to disappoint them. When he was around, nothing went right. He felt that keenly, a feeling that hadn't changed much even now.

"You mean I'll just be in the way? Is that why I'm being sent to Ren?"

"Nonsense," Seirai scoffed. "Is that what's got you so down? Nothing could be further from the truth. The Taiho is irreplaceable."

"Because I'm a kirin?"

"That is certainly true."

"But—" he started to say. Seirai leaned forward and waited for him to continue. Taiki shook his head and closed his mouth.

Seirai smiled sadly. "Of course this has all put you a bit under the weather. All the more reason to seize the opportunity and get the job done as best you can. And I strongly suspect certain aspects of your life will see a definite improvement upon your return."

"See a definite improvement?"

"That's right." Seirai smiled raised his hand in an exaggerated gesture. "The details are top secret."

"They're what?" Taiki reflexively grabbed Seirai's sleeve. "Um, Seirai—"

"No, no, no. When you look at me like that, there's no way I can resist spilling the beans. And if I did, I'd catch a tongue-lashing from Gyousou-sama for sure."

Chapter 4

A flurry of communiq  s between the Foreign Ministries of Tai and Ren followed. Schedules were set and the mission members were selected.

Taiki was designated head of mission. His retinue included his bodyguard Tansui and Regent Seirai. The deputy ambassadors were Sougen of the Zui Provincial Guard of the Left and Asen of the Palace Guard of the Right. Serving those four were a handful of junior ministers, bringing the total to only nine (in addition to Taiki, Seirai and Tansui).

They were not escorted by any Imperial heralds and traveled in civilian dress. Although in name a diplomatic mission, in fact Taiki was traveling as a personal emissary of the Royal Tai at the personal behest of the Royal Ren.

The Kingdom of Ren was an island in the Kyokai, separated from the main continent to the south and west. A mirror image of Tai, it was the kingdom furthest away. In fact, Tai and Ren had no formal diplomatic relations. Up to this juncture, they had not once exchanged ambassadors, the necessity having never before presented itself.

The only change between then and now was that Renrin had personally helped Taiki out. She had been the one who'd brought Taiki back to this world after he was swept away to the strange realm of Yamato—then his home country.

"What kind of person is the Ren Taiho?" Taiki asked Seirai soon after they left Kouki.

They employed kijuu on the way to Ren, but Taiki still couldn't fly one on his own. Instead, they rode comfortably in a palanquin strapped to the backs of two oxen-like kijuu.

Seirai raised an eyebrow and said in an almost startled voice, "I thought that'd be something the Taiho would know about."

"I haven't met her either. Well, I have *met* her, but she just brought me back here. I was really startled at the time and only remember her face." He confessed with a touch of embarrassment, "To be honest, I spent most of the time crying. I don't really understand it myself. And when I wasn't crying I was sleeping. When I woke up, the Ren Taiho had already returned to Ren."

"So that's how things went. I don't know her either. There really isn't anybody in Tai who's familiar with the Ren Taiho or the Royal Ren."

"There are only twelve of us, so it'd be nice if we could all get to know each other."

Seirai grinned broadly. "That's certainly true. Though it should become clear why the getting-to-know-you part is not so simple."

Taiki responded with a blank look. After thinking about it, he couldn't disagree. Ren was too far away from Tai to visit on a regular basis.

Even using these fleet-footed kijuu, leaving the territory of Tai had taken a day and a night. Another day and night to cross the Kyokai. Then setting out from a port city in Ryuu, they skirted the coastline toward Kyou. At Han, they turned south, and then again crossed the ocean. After two weeks of flying, the coastline of Ren finally came into view.

"Yeah, I get it now," Taiki said as they alighted in Juurei, the capital city of Ren. "It'd be hard to get to know anybody when they live so far away. The going and coming won't leave much time for anything else."

"Exactly," Seirai smiled. "That was a rough trip. How are you holding up?"

They set down in an open field on the outskirts of Juurei. The city before them was still festooned with the decorations celebrating the New Year.

"We only spent half a day in the air today."

"Ah, yes." Seirai sighed with an air of disappointment. "You've got much more perseverance than I do. An old man like me is so much dead weight."

Taiki peered up at Seirai. "You think you're just dead weight?"

"Unfortunately so. My specialty is seizing young ruffians by the neck and giving them a good dressing down." He grimaced playfully. "If I didn't give you the

occasional paddling for pulling the occasional prank, my life would be completely devoid of fun."

Taiki giggled. "I'll have to try harder."

"If you wouldn't mind," Seirai laughed.

Two junior ministers—who'd arrived at Juurei ahead of them—emerged from the Horse Gate adjacent the huge main gate. Among the four junior ministers, two alternately went ahead to arrange the night's lodgings.

"Ah, the reception party has arrived. Tonight's accommodations should be a cut above the usual."

Chapter 5

Juurei was unbelievable warm. The weather had become noticeably more temperate as they had passed through Ryuu, Kyou and Han. Upon reaching the south of Ryuu they finally removed their wool-lined down coats—which were absolutely necessary during the Tai winters—for good.

Entering the inn and changing into court dress for the first time since leaving Hakkei Palace was enough to put in Seirai in a dour mood.

"It's hot, isn't it?" Taiki called out to Seirai when he came out of his room.

Seirai agreed glumly. "I'd heard that Ren was hot, but I didn't imagine it was like this. And this is typical of their spring and fall."

"That's for sure."

"At any rate, this is typical court dress for this time of year. I'm going to pay a quick visit to the Foreign Ministry and announce our arrival."

"Do I have to come with?"

"Just checking in for the time being. When the time comes, you'll be going in full ceremonial dress too. So stay cool and comfortable while you can. I should return by nightfall."

"But who knows what kind of trouble I'll get myself into before you get back."

Seirai laughed. "You've got a point there. Tansui will have his hands full."

He glanced at the bodyguard lurking like a shadow in the corner of the room. As always, Tansui maintained a stoic front and didn't respond. Nevertheless, there was a flicker in his eyes that could be taken for a clever smile.

"Tansui doesn't know this, but I've always wanted to make Tansui lose his cool just once."

Taiki said, "I'll try my best to make it happen."

"You do that. And as soon as I get back, I'm sure I'll see you swinging like a monkey from one of the trees out there in the garden."

Chapter 6

Seirai left with two junior ministers, who had also donned ceremonial court dress. On their way out, they passed Sougen and Asen coming to visit Taiki. They'd already changed out of their traveling clothes.

"You must be pretty tuckered out by now," said Sougen.

Sougen had previously served under General Gyousou. With the establishment of the new Imperial Court, he'd been appointed commander of the critical Zui Provincial Guard of the Right. He wasn't the giant of a man that was Ganchou of the Palace Guard of the Left. But he possessed a towering stature and a calm dignity and bearing that reminded Taiki of the fairy tale samurai he used to read about back in Japan.

"I'm okay. Look—" Standing at the window, Taiki indicated the gardens outside the inn. The two generals sauntered up to the window and looked where Taiki was pointing. "There are flowers in the garden."

Gyousou had said that Ren was a place where there were flowers in winter, but it hadn't seemed possible that such a kingdom existed in this season. No snow lay on the ground. Even this close to the window, he didn't feel the cold. In Tai, the frigid draft leaking through the nooks and crannies in the window sills always made him shiver.

Sougen narrowed his eyes contemplatively. "What kind of flowers, I wonder. They would seem to be coming into bloom. I wouldn't have believed that there was a kingdom where no snow fell at this time of year."

"Me neither," agreed Taiki, pressing his forehead against the glass. "Since Tai is covered in white, I thought it'd be like that everywhere here."

"Everywhere here?"

"Yeah. It only snows now and then where I lived in Yamato. It wasn't

uncommon for there to be no snow at all. But it was never this warm. Still, Tai being the way it is, I figured that all the kingdoms here were the same way. Because this is my first winter here. I guess Tai is the only kingdom that cold."

"Indeed," Sougen nodded quite thoughtfully.

"This world must be really big."

"The fields outside the city are still awaiting the harvest."

"In these southern kingdoms, it looks like there's no letting the fields lie fallow during the winter months," observed Asen.

"I've heard that they can grow a wide variety of grains."

"Wow," said Taiki. "Crops even grow in the winter. You can go to a field in the middle of the winter and pull vegetables out of the ground."

"That would be the case."

"It'd be nice if you could do that in Tai," Taiki said mostly to himself.

The two general heartily agreed.

"Children can run around outside. And livestock put out to pasture."

Just how did these people live here in this warm climate— Taiki stared raptly out the window as if he couldn't get enough of even this tiny slice of Ren.

"How about we take a little stroll?" said Asen. "I'm getting my second wind back, so I'd be happy to accompany you."

"Really. Is that okay?" Taiki said, jumping up.

Asen smiled and nodded. Both he and Gyousou had served in the Palace Guard under the previous king, and Taiki had heard them referred to as the two jewels in the crown. Asen was renowned as a skilled soldier, and perhaps for that reason was also compared in appearance to Gyousou as well.

Except that now and then Gyousou could put on a fearsome front, possessed of an almost frightening ambition that Asen never displayed. So Taiki never felt cowed by Asen's presence.

Taiki looked at Sougen expectantly. As Sougen thought the request over, Asen interjected, "There can't be anything wrong with taking a look at Juurei, can

there? It seems to me that expanding the scope of the Taiho's world is a good thing."

Sougen nodded. "Well, with Tansui and the rest of there, I don't see anything wrong with that."

Chapter 7

Like Kouki, Juurei spread out beneath the towering Ryou'un Mountain. Though it was the middle of winter, the streets were filled with people. A bright and open atmosphere seemed to embrace the whole city. Taiki found it all very strange.

Kouki was pretty much the opposite. Its citizens lived under roofs covered with snow, and depended on the thick walls of their houses to keep warm. The mountains and valleys were a solid blanket of white. Not even the livestock could be let outdoors. Any nobody would think for a moment that any crops out there awaited any kind of harvest.

Only those who absolutely had to ventured far from home, and then dressed in a thick, padded long coats with a high collars. The head wrapped in a scarf or fur, ducking into the wind, moving as fast as was possible, pressing on with firm determination from shelter to shelter—that was the kind of kingdom Tai was.

Ren was the exact opposite. Even at this time of year, much of the city was wide open. The shutters of the windows were open. Taiki could see inside the building. The doors to the shops along the high street were also open, and great crowds of people came and went. People paused to chat in the streets. Children ran to and fro. And in the fields, livestock grazed on the dry grass covering the fields.

"This is really something," Taiki exclaimed.

"Yes, it is," Asen agreed with a small smile. "If winters in Tai were half this temperate, the lives of the people would be completely different."

Taiki thought so too. This kingdom did not strike the eye as particularly wealthy—Kyou and Han seemed much richer—but there was a carefree air that somehow seemed to suffuse the streets and the people. Ren had apparently been afflicted by chaos until recently, but no sign of that tension was anywhere

to be seen.

Tai was never like this. Not much time had passed since the change in the Imperial Court, and it was not unheard of for people to freeze to death on the streets of cities like Kouki. There were towns that had exhausted their stores and people starved to death. So despite the tremendous risks, lines of people could be seen leaving their home towns behind and setting off through the deep snow for a neighboring village.

Despite having to scrape by harvesting whatever they could from the land, all their spare time and energy was spent mining gems and silver and gold. The previous king had hoarded all of it for himself, laying that heavy burden on the backs of the Tai people for a long time. And though a new king had acceded to the throne, not much had changed.

"It'd be nice if God had blessed Tai with warm weather," said Taiki.

Sougen smiled. "Tentei was good enough to give us a new king instead."

"Yeah," said Taiki, lowering both his voice and his gaze.

"As long as there is a good king, the kingdom and the people can join hands and overcome any hardship together. That's the only blessing we can hope for."

"Sure."

"Was there something else?"

Taiki shook his head and didn't say anything more. He avoided Sougen questioning eyes and turned his gaze toward the broad fields of green, where farmers were working with spades and hoes at a relaxed pace.

It'd be nice if Tai was as warm as this, he couldn't help thinking.

Chapter 8

Returning to the inn, they met Seirai. Even after retiring to his room to prepare for the next day, that was all Taiki could think about.

If Tai was warm like Kyou or Han. Or blessed with the warm climate of Ren.

Since Gyousou had taken him beyond the Forbidden Gate, a small lump of ice had remained behind in his chest. The people of Tai lived within that cold. From what he heard from the ministers, the lot of the average person's life was not a good one. Word of people freezing to death or starving to death was as good as a thermometer.

So many people in such desperate circumstances. Amidst the pure white landscapes.

And yet he could do nothing.

Taiki was a kirin. Something made by Heaven to serve the people. Follow the Divine Will and listen to Divine Mandate. It was said he was a child of Tentei and Heaven's ambassador. But he had not been furnished with the power to save anybody, let alone change the weather.

The kirin chose the king. That was all. Taiki had chosen Gyousou and made him king. Taiki had a feeling that he had thus used up the last of his miracles.

I really am powerless.

Even what he ought to do he couldn't do. He had his duties as Saiho, as Province Lord, but not way to accomplish them until he grew older. In fact, Seirai and Gyousou did his job for him. He just did as he was told. It was up to Seirai and the others to explain why.

Having chosen the king, what did a kirin exist for?

He knew people had high expectations for him. He understood from observing Seirai and Asen and Sougen. They treated him deferentially, but as a child. As

Seirai explained, nothing other than the respect owned such an irreplaceable object.

But what exactly was the nature of this irreplaceability? He perhaps had possessed it once. And in the future, Gyousou might stray from the Way and the time for a new king would come, and there it would be again. But Taiki now was nothing but a mere child of eleven. He could do nothing. He understood nothing. He was simply baggage.

Therein lay the source of his anxiety.

He knew what was expected of him. But had no idea how to fulfill those expectations. All he could do was stand and watch. He couldn't shake the feeling that his was a useless existence and otherwise in the way. Didn't everybody think that? Wasn't it an entirely obvious conclusion? Even Seirai? Even Gyousou?

Chapter 9

The next morning, Taiki donned his ceremonial garb. They went to the northern quarter of Juurie, passing through the Highland Gate into the soaring Imperial compound, and then to Urou Palace, the residence of the Royal Ren.

The party was met by the Daikoujin and his assistants from the Ministry of Heaven, who served as their guides. They passed under the Five Gates one by one. With each gate, tunnel, and flight of stairs leading them deeper in and higher up, they arrived at the gigantic, cloud-piercing mountain's third station, and then the fifth station, and then the seventh.

Climbing the final passageway to the *Romon*, the fifth gate, they were already above the Sea of Clouds, where the mountain peaks floating like islands. The expansive Inner and Outer Palaces and the layout of Urou Palace were much the same as Hakkei Palace.

The air above the Sea of Clouds was even warmer than the world below. The upper slopes of Juurei Mountain were less precipitous than Kouki Mountain, and the broad summit of the mountain spread out from the water's edge.

The Imperial Palace compound was larger than that in Tai, the buildings arranged in a spacious and relaxed manner. The spaces between the buildings, despite the time of year, were thick with verdant growth. The view aroused in Taiki a touch of homesickness.

Most of the large palaces and manors spaced among the luxurious green had their doors flung wide open. Many of the corridors and arbors were not fenced or walled in. Taken all together, it resembled what he'd seen at Mt. Hou during his short stay there.

Taiki and his retinue exited the *Romon* and headed to the *Gaiden*. In the center of the cool but cloistered *Seiden* was a resplendent throne. There was nobody on or anywhere near it.

The empty throne surprised Taiki and obviously confused Seirai and the others. But the Ren officials who had guided them there appeared even more taken aback. They looked at each other exchanging exasperated expressions, and cast flustered glances about the great hall.

A solitary officer came running from the deserted wings of the Seiden. He whispered something to the Daikoujin. The Daikoujin's eyes widened with surprise. After a heated back and forth between the two of them, he approached Taiki with a troubled air and bowed deeply.

"I'm sorry to have to communicate such disrespectful tiding to you. I hope you do not take offense, and I dearly regret having to trouble you in such a manner. But if you would not mind, I should like you to proceed somewhat further in."

"Somewhat further in?" queried Seirai.

Asen and Sougen looked at each other. Guests from another kingdom were typically greeted in the Visitor's Pavilion, situated in the western part of the Gaiden. Moving any further in would mean entering the Naiden. No matter how cordial the relations, even a king from another kingdom would think twice before doing such a thing.

"We were instructed to escort you to where His Highness happens to be right now," the Daikoujin explained, sweat beating on his brow.

Palanquins were hastily summoned and Taiki and his retinue were solemnly born further in. Passing the Inner Palace barrier, they entered the Naiden and continued on for quite a ways. Finally a pair of much higher and stouter barrier walls came into view.

"Um, Seirai?" Taiki whispered to his regent, sitting in the palanquin next to him.

"Yes?"

"Wasn't that building we just saw Jinjuu Manor?"

"Hmm—" Seirai answered in a perplexed tone of voice. "In fact, the thought occurred to me as well."

"Then wouldn't that make this the Roshin?"

"Well, yes, I guess it would."

"If we keep on going through the gate at the end of the Roshin, then we'll be in the Imperial living quarters?"

"Yes, indeed. But I can't imagine—" Seirai scowled. His forehead was growing damp as well. And it just wasn't due to the warm weather.

At the heart of the Imperial Palace, covering the peaks floating above the Sea of Clouds, the Imperial living quarters consisted of a number of small, city-like blocks of manors and palaces, accessible through multiple walls and gates.

The innermost buildings comprised the "North" palace compound, the Queen's residence. Just before it was the Royal Sleeping Quarters, called the *Koukyuu*, or "the Palace at the back." To the west of the Koukyuu was the "East" palace compound, including Choumei Palace and Kaei Palace, where the king's parents resided.

In the "West" compound was Godou Palace, home to the five species of holy birds, including the Hou'ou and Hakuchi. The *Taibyou* where the king worshipped—more specifically, Fukuju Manor housing the Roboku, where children and crops were prayed for—was also located there.

The Koukyuu, along with the East and West palace compounds, were together designated the *Enshin*. Because the Koukyuu was in the very center of the Enshin, it was often used to refer to the whole thing.

However, except for the "West" palace compound, the Koukyuu in Hakkei Palace in Tai was mostly shuttered. And even when it was open, the buildings in the Koukyuu aside from the "West" palace compound were hardly places where the Saiho could wander about as his leisure.

Even Taiki knew that much.

Except that the Daikoujin and his escorts had stopped right in front of the gate that lead nowhere other than to the Koukyuu. The palanquins were set down and they all bowed deeply.

"Ah, we are deeply sorry to have to say this, but we would ask that you proceed the rest of the way on your own. We are forbidden to continue any further."

"Umm—" said a flustered Seirai.

The Daikoujin interrupted him. "We were instructed to make the invitation. Please proceed as you are. I'm sure there will be guardsmen inside the gate who will take things from here."

"You mean for us to continue on by ourselves?"

The Daikoujin bowed and apologized profusely. The sweat poured off his face in small rivulets. There was no hiding the poor man's flustered state.

Taiki turned to his companions and said encouragingly, "He's says it's okay, and we were invited, after all."

"I guess so, but—" Seirai glanced back and forth between the inside and outside of the gate.

"Well, then," Asen finally said in a small voice. "It'd probably be best if the rest of us stayed behind. Going all together like this would no doubt be an imposition."

"Not at all," the Daikoujin said, raising his voice. "You were all to be included." He was practically wiping his sweaty brow on the cobblestones. "I understand that this must strike you as a severe breach of protocol, but please, go on."

Chapter 10

The Koukyuu was quiet and apparently unoccupied. They didn't meet a single official or minister, but walked along the cobblestones and reached the other side of the gate complex. There wasn't anybody there either, not even the guards that usually stood watch at every gate. And nothing resembling a greeting committee.

"Where is everybody?" wondered Taiki, peeking out from the frame of the open gate. The buildings housing the sleeping quarters reached out beyond a lush garden, but if were people were there, he couldn't sense it. He turned to the adults around him. "What do we do?"

They looked just as confused as he was.

"Seirai?"

"I'm afraid I can't help you there."

"I've never been in the Koukyuu before. How about you, Seirai?"

"Um, if you're talking about being inside the gates, many times. The Koukyuu at Hakkei Palace is closed, but I've been in there. It's completely empty, though. As for the Koukyuu in other kingdoms, no."

Judging by their pale expression, it was the same for Sougen and Asen. The junior ministers looked like ghosts.

Taiki took a step further inside the compound. Casting his eyes around the courtyard, he ascertained that no one was there. He shrugged and crossed the courtyard to the garden to get a better look at the other buildings.

"Taiho."

Taiki scrambled onto the stonework foundation and spied another courtyard deeper in amongst the buildings. He cautiously raised his voice.

"Um, excuse me—"

"T-Taiho—"

Taiki glanced over his shoulder. "But nobody's around. I think our only choice is to raise our voices a bit."

"Yes, but—"

"Hey, anybody home? *Gomen kudasai!*" Taiki said with unusual boldness. His retainers opened their eyes wide with surprise. But Taiki was only doing what he always did when he visited the neighbors back in Japan.

"Excuse me?" Taiki raised his voice. And got no answer.

"Nobody seems to be home. What now?"

"How am I supposed to know?" Seirai grumbled.

"Why don't we just keep following these gardens until we run across somebody?"

"You can't be serious."

"We can't just turn around and go back, can't we?"

"You do have a point there."

"I think the only acceptable thing to do is to go indoors. Leave it to me."

"Wait—" Seirai started to say. He clenched his fist resolutely. "I'll go with you. Sougen and Asen, wait here."

"But—"

"I may not be much, but I'm at least a Taiho on paper. I figure they can't punish me too much. Wish me luck."

"I'm going too," said Tansui.

Seirai stopped him. "With things wide open like this, let's not do anything rash. The Taiho has his shirei, and I'll be with him."

Chapter 11

Taiki held onto Seirai's hand and walked further into the compound. They crossed through two courtyards and came to a temple, but found it empty. The temple simply couldn't be uninhabited. It appeared to be smartly kept. Fresh incense and flowers had recently been placed on the memorial shelves.

With no particular reason in mind, Taiki set off in a westward direction and then headed toward the "North" palace compound. They crossed a promenade and entered another courtyard, looked around, went onto the garden in the "North" palace compound and stopped.

Taiki stared at the pastoral view before him. He glanced up at Seirai. "It's a farm!"

"Apparently so."

"There aren't any farms in Hakkei Palace. Or is that something only found in the Koukyuu?"

"Not ordinarily, I don't think."

"They said there was some sort of civil war going on. I wonder if things got so bad they decided to plant crops inside the palace."

"Hard to say."

With Taiki clinging to Seirai's hand, they made their way down a dirt path between the magnificent vegetable gardens, the leafy greens practically forming a carpet beneath their feet. They rounded the corner of a shed. The pastoral view stretched out before them. Following the clean and orderly paths, they came across an enclosure of small trees arranged in neat rows, very much resembling an orchard.

"Seirai," said Taiki, pointing.

Signs of human life had at last appeared. A single farmer with a pair of pruning

shears was at work beneath a tree bearing some kind of red fruit.

"Hey—" Taiki called out. He let go of Seirai's hand and ran toward the bright copse of trees. "Excuse me—"

A farmer dressed in a peasant's work clothes turned around. His eyes focused on Taiki and then on Seirai behind him. He smiled and wiped his brow with his sleeve. He added the branch he'd just cut to the small pile at his feet and raised his youthful face.

"Sorry for barging in unannounced. There was nobody at the gate and we couldn't find anybody."

This seemed to take the young man somewhat by surprise. "There wasn't anybody there? They must all be taking a siesta."

"We hate to interrupt your work, but do you think there's somebody here who could show us around? I—um, we—came from Tai. My name is Taiki."

"Ah," the man said, a friendly smile rising to his face. "I see. So you're the Tai Taiho. I heard you were a small fellow. It looks like the reports were right on the mark."

"And you are?"

"My name is Ou. Ou Seitaku."

"This is a really great garden."

The young man grinned. "You think so?"

"What's that red fruit called?"

"Red *kashou*. Here, have one—"

Seitaku casually reached out and plucked a glittering red fruit from a branch. He dunked it in a water bucket and wiped it off with a handkerchief. "Here you go, Tai Taiho. There are seeds inside, so take care."

"Sure." Taiki looked up at him. "Are you sure this is okay? Doesn't all of this belong to the king?"

"I grew it, so I don't see the problem."

"But won't the king get mad at you?"

A slightly perplexed expression came to Seitaku's face. "Well, I'm the king, so I think that unlikely." He placed the red fruit in Taiki's palm.

Taiki gaped at him. "You—you're the Royal Ren?"

"That's me."

Unsure of how to proceed with this information in hand, Taiki peeked over his shoulder at Seirai. Seirai stood rooted to the spot, eyes wide. Confused, Taiki turned his attention back to the grinning Seitaku. He'd studied the proper protocol for accepting an audience with the king in the Seiden. Nothing he'd learned had covered situations like this.

As if taking no note of Taiki's bewilderment, Seitaku picked another fruit from the tree and said, indicating Seirai with a glance, "Do you think this gentleman would like one?"

"Yes. I mean, no," Seirai stumbled.

"Ah, it isn't polite of me to keep you standing around like this. There's a gazebo no far off. Let's go over there."

Taiki nodded, because he couldn't think of any other way to respond.

Chapter 12

Seitaku filled the bucket with red kashou and they made their way out of the orchard. A little further on they came across on a pond enclosed within beautiful, stone-lined banks. Here and there bridges decorated with intricate geometric designs arced over the pond. The patios and gazebos surrounding the pond almost seemed to have been drawn there like grazing animals seeking out water.

Seitaku headed for one of the gazebos and waved to them from the water's edge. "Taiho, have a seat. That formal clothing must be hot. How about you at least remove your top coat?"

"Um, okay. But—" He looked at Seirai.

A thin smile came to Seirai's lips. "Well, if he insists—"

"You as well."

"Oh, there's no need to worry about a petty official such as myself."

"But it must be uncomfortable."

"Ah, true, yes, it is. Well, then, no harm in taking you up on that offer—"

Observing the vacillating Seirai with bright eyes, Seitaku washed his hands in the pond and then rinsed off the rest of the fruit in the bucket. He lined them up on a stone table facing the water.

"I'm in an awfully rude state, what with the Taiho having gone to such trouble to dress up for the occasion. The word I got was that this was a personal visit, not official business."

"Yes, um, sorry about that."

Seitaku laughed. "Nothing the Taiho needs to apologize for. I tend to be rather careless about such things. It not being about business or politics, I figured we

could treat it like the neighbors stopping by for a spot of tea. The Taiho will surely have a few heated words to say on that account."

"Me?"

"No, no," Seitaku said with a grin. "My Taiho. It's funny. From the start, Renrin hasn't given me a moment's peace about me being the way I am." He laughed again. "I got a bit caught up with my red kashou, so without giving it any thought, I just said to send you on through. Of course, I should have done as Renrin instructed and donned more formal attire and waited in the Gaiden."

"What were you doing when we came in?"

"Pruning the trees. By cutting back the branches that don't bear the best fruit, the rest will grow much bigger."

"That's something you seem to know a lot about."

"Because I'm a farmer. It's what farmers do."

"Isn't your job being king?" Taiki in a surprised voice.

Seitaku reacted as if this question was entirely unexpected. He tilted his head to the side. "My *duty*, perhaps, but not my *job*. Being king won't put food on the table, after all."

Taiki blinked, not grasping the subtleties of the distinction. Seitaku smiled. "Wouldn't you say the job of a farmer is growing crops and raising animals?"

"Yeah—I guess so." Taiki nodded. "But isn't fulfilling your duty the same as a job?"

"I don't really think so."

"Your duty is different from your job?"

Seitaku smiled. "A job is that which I do at my own choosing. My duty was bestowed on me by Heaven."

Taiki was puzzling this over when a familiar voice rang in his ears. Spinning around, he saw Seirai standing there mutely and another figure coming up behind him. "Sougen," he called out.

At the same time, a woman said, feigned surprise in her voice, "What in the

world are you doing meeting the Taiho dressed like that for?" Her brilliant golden hair glowed like sunlight. "And to make matters worse, in a place like this! I don't care how personal a visit it is, there are limits to such things!"

"Of course, of course. She's right, of course. You must all pardon my manners."

"And on top of that, leaving his escorts at the gate completely at loose ends!"

Seitaku apologized like an unruly child, though the sparkle remained in his eyes. The woman must have taken note of it as well. With a half-piqued, half-amused expression, she knelt down in front of Taiki so they were approximately eye-to-eye.

"You must be the Tai Taiho. I'm pleased to welcome you to Ren. Please don't take any offense."

"Are you the Ren Taiho?"

"Yes. I am very please to meet you."

"Me too. Um, thank you very much."

"What for?"

"Gyoukuyou-sama on Mt. Hou told me that the Ren Taiho lent Senshi something very valuable when she came to get me."

"Ah," Renrin smiled. "The Gogoukanda, you mean? His Highness let me borrow it. It is he you should thank. Though I think His Highness should get changed first."

Catching another amused expression, Seitaku muttered, "Yeah, I suppose." He announced, "I shall go and mend my ways. If you all wouldn't mind waiting here —"

Laughing cheerily, Seitaku returned to the Imperial living quarters. Taiki and the others were escorted back to the Gaiden. Then they all started over from square one, albeit doing everything by the book this time.

Chapter 13

Taiki was scheduled to stay there for three days. He and his retinue were given an official reception and made an official appearance at court. But were otherwise treated as personal guests.

They were given the use of a wing of the guest palace. There and within the main gardens of the Seishin as well, the ministerial staff dispatched to the environs were limited to the minimum number of attendants and caretakers. Not to mention that Seitaku breezily gave them free rein of the Imperial living quarters without, it seemed, a second thought.

"It just can't be a good idea, them letting their guard down all the time like this," mused Sougen, who was having a hard time understanding what he was seeing.

The adults in general seemed ill at ease with all this ease. Taiki, on the other hand, was having a grand time. He didn't get all the stuff about ceremony and protocol. And even when it made sense, he wasn't used to it, and constantly had to be on his toes so he wouldn't screw up.

But it wasn't like that in Urou Palace at all.

"Perhaps they feel comfortable letting down their guard because the palace is so secure," Asen wryly responded.

Seirai sighed. "Secure or happy-go-lucky. The people of Ren seem a generous lot in any case."

"That's not a good thing?" Taiki asked.

Seirai's shoulders sagged a bit. "I'm not saying it's a bad thing. Only that it's hard teaching an old dog like me new tricks. I came up through the ranks as a military man. I'm an expert at following the rules to the letter and snapping to attention. When it comes to the opposite—"

Both Sougen and Asen nodded in agreement. "It's like we don't really know where you stand, so we don't stand very tall. The Taiho shouldn't be afraid to enjoy himself. This place seems to fit your character."

"It's not like I don't like Hakkei Palace."

"I know that. And it's not like I dislike Urou Palace. I mean, these past two days, I've watched Tansui get himself lost at least three times."

"That's true," Taiki grinned.

"And yesterday, Tansui was fit to be tied when Ren Taiho brought us breakfast and made us tea."

"I wouldn't go noising this around, but that's a state I've almost never seen him in."

Taiki giggled. Tansui was standing by the door pretending as he always did that he was overhearing none of this. Still, he did look a bit downcast.

"Well, I'm going to take off for a while," Taiki said.

He left the tall, grand building and Tansui followed after him without a word. Taiki headed straight for the "North" palace complex. When Seitaku wasn't busy with business, he could usually be found on his farm. When Taiki arrived at the fields, sure enough, there was Seitaku in his peasant garb.

"A good day to you!"

His utterly unaffected smile and manner always delighted Taiki. Given a minute of spare time during his official and ceremonial duties and here is where Seitaku would come. Taiki had been "helping out" from the start. Not so much really working as wandering around, and getting things for Seitaku when he asked for it.

Taiki had no experience doing any kind of farm work. He wasn't sure what even constituted "help" in the first place. Going this way and that and following Seitaku's directions wasn't a whole lot different from what he did back in Tai.

"I must be getting in your way a lot," he said, gathering up a pile of prunings he had run into and knocked over.

"Not at all," Seitaku's smile assured him.

Taiki had the impression that this king never stopped smiling. "I know I'm a pain in the neck, but since we have to leave tomorrow, I was hoping you could put up with me for another day."

"You're not a pain in the neck in the slightest. When I was a kid, I worked alongside the people in the village and learned the ropes the same way you are now." He added with a bright grin. "Ah, but I guess learning how to be farmer won't do you a lot of good. And here I am running you around in circles."

"It's nothing like that. I think it's really fun helping you out like this."

He was telling the truth. This was the first time he had ever seen farming up close, so he found it very interesting. It felt nice moving about in the warm breeze. Watching Seitaku working so energetically gave him a good feeling as well.

More than anything, Seitaku's easy-going attitude made him fun to be around. Taiki didn't understand the logic of this world or the reasoning of adults. Just being around adults all the time was the most stressful job he could imagine.

Taiki said dejectedly, "But I was thinking that if I was getting in the way, I could always go somewhere else—"

Seitaku tilted his head to the side. "Did something happen?"

"Something happen?" Taiki echoed.

"If I asked you to help me, then I shouldn't think that you were also in the way. So why would you ask such a question?"

"Because—I really can't do anything."

"You gathered up all those prunings, didn't you? Helped fetch the water, carried all that straw—"

"All I did was carry it."

"That alone constitutes help, doesn't it? When you talk like that, it makes me think you don't see yourself as being very useful."

Seitaku looked at him with his clear, warm eyes. Taiki nodded. "I don't want to think so, but I'm afraid it's true."

"Why is that?"

"Because I'm so totally useless. Not just farming. Everything. Gyousou-sama says it's just because I'm small, but I can tell I'm a disappointment to everybody."

"Really?" Seitaku asked. Taiki nodded his head. Seitaku patted him on the back. "Why don't we take a break?" he said, indicating a pile of hay.

"No, we can keep working."

"Well, I'm pooped. How about some tea?" Seitaku directed his voice at the levy bordering the adjacent rice field where Tansui had withdrawn to observe from a comfortable distance. "Hey, Mr. Bodyguard, would you like some tea too?"

Tansui waved his hand, declining the offer.

"Not a job I'd want to have, sitting around like that all the time," Seitaku said, getting out a big earthenware teapot. "I used to think it'd be tough being a bodyguard because it was dangerous. But times like this, when there's no danger at all, could be just as bad."

"Yeah," Taiki laughed. But the smile quickly faded. Staring into the teacup Seitaku passed him, he said, "So there's a difference between your job and your duty—"

"That's right."

"When I heard that, I thought it must be true. The duty of the kirin is to pick the king. I've done my duty. It'd be nice if I could just do my job the best I knew how. Except as Saiho, as Province Lord, I'm too small to really do anything."

"I've always thought the kirin's duty was to act with compassion."

"Not choose the king?"

"Choosing the king is one aspect of that, is it not? Choosing the ruler who will best serve the people?"

"So there's still a duty left for me to perform."

"I would say so."

"Then what is a kirin's job?"

"Taiki's job is to grow up." Seitaku smiled. "That's the job of every child, isn't

it?" He plucked a red kasho from a low-hanging limb and placed it in Taiki's palm. "You've got a lot on your mind. And that's part of your job too. As is eating and sleeping and crying and laughing.

Taiki looked at the bright, red fruit in his hand. "But is that enough? The people of Tai are in a bad state. Tai is very cold in the winter. A lot of people are suffering amidst all that snow. Even though I'm Saiho and Province Lord, there's nothing I can give them. Just growing up with nothing to offer—"

Seitaku interrupted, "I'm no great leader of men myself. A mere farmer who can hardly make heads nor tails of politics and government. Renrin's got a talent for that sort of thing, so I leave it up to her. Looking after the crops and livestock is about the best I can do."

"Even when you're the king?"

"I guess so," Seitaku laughed. "That's why I built this farm. It's the one way I know to make myself useful. Having plowed under the royal gardens, and thinking about the time and effort it takes to keep things all shipshape, I thought I should do my part to defray the public expenditures of money. At the very least, it'd be cheaper and easier than buying from the stores in Juurei."

"So it's like you're paying your room and board."

"Exactly," Seitaku answered with an earnest nod. "You can't live without somebody paying for your upkeep. I'm a farmer, see? That duty was given to me by the kingdom. But there's no way I'd be able to pay the wages of all the officers and officials, or afford the silk ceremonial robes, or wine and dine the guests of honor. That's why even Renrin tells me that I cannot limit myself to what only I can afford with my own labor. It seems the kingdom would lose prestige in the process."

"That makes sense."

"As it turns out, I'm not all that useful either. But if there is a Tentei, then he surely would have foreseen my shortcomings."

Taiki gazed up at Seitaku, taken aback by this statement.

"If a farmer like myself is to be the king, then that must have what Heaven had in mind all along. So not doing anything must be what I was destined to do."

Tending to a kingdom seems to me a lot like tending to my crops."

"Tending to a kingdom—"

"A tree will grow just fine if left according to its own devices. And perhaps a kingdom will too. The tree knows what's best for the tree. All I can do is lend a helping hand. If the leaves wither, for example, I take that as a sign to add water. I think a kingdom is much the same. In other words, that is the kind of husbandry Heaven was looking for, and that is why Heaven chose a farmer."

"And the Ren Taiho? When you're making yourself useful like this, how does she help out?"

"Not at all," Seitaku responded with a smile. "Renrin isn't a farmer. She doesn't know the difference between a weed and a flower, or when to water and when not to water."

"So there's nothing she can do?"

"Hardly," Seitaku said brightly. "She can take delight when the harvest comes in."

"That's all?" Taiki said disbelievingly.

"That is no small thing. When it's cold outside and I'm tired and working in the fields is the last I want to do, when I think of the harvest going to waste and Renrin's disappointment, I buck myself up and put my shoulder to the wheel." Seitaku gazed at the orchard. "I am standing watch over the kingdom. Watching for hints of a bad weather. Watching for wells running dry. That is the duty of a guardian. The Taiho watches me in the same way. Making sure I am doing my duty. Watching for signs of hidden rot. Having eyes to see is very much something."

Standing watch. Taiki turned the words over in his mind. "I could do the same thing. Just that."

"It's not just that. You're like your bodyguard there. Standing watch is no small responsibility."

He's right, Taiki thought, sneaking a peek at Tansui. At times like this, Tansui stood watch from a safe distance and kept his eyes peeled.

"Staying on your toes, keeping your mind alert—that's a pretty impressive accomplishment, don't you think?"

"Yeah," Taiki nodded.

"Do you think Gyousou-sama would be happy about me standing and watching?"

"Of course," Seitaku answered pleasantly. "I don't understand government or what kirin do, but when it comes to being a king and being a farmer, I get that. I think the Royal Tai as well will put a lot of faith in what you see with your own two eyes."

I wonder, Taiki said to himself. He had a hard time believing Gyousou would ever put such faith in a child like himself.

"If I am the watchman for this kingdom, then Renrin is the one who watches over me. Perhaps that is the true calling of the kirin."

Chapter 14

Taiki and the others returned to Kouki a little more than a month after leaving Tai. The capital was buried beneath a blanket of snow. Taiki gazed down on the white mountains and valleys as they flew in a ragged formation toward the Forbidden Gate.

As soon as they dismounted, the gate attendants emerged and greeted them, their breath condensing in small clouds. Guardsmen were called, the kijuu were handed over to the soldiers, and the gate doors were opened in the quiet stillness.

Taiki said, "Ren really is different from Tai, and not just because of the weather."

Seirai laughed. "It surely is."

"Are you relieved, Seirai?"

"A bit."

Smiling, they passed through the Forbidden Gate and headed to the Naiden. Word of their arrival having preceded them, when they entered the Naiden, the ministers were already seated and the king occupied the throne.

Taiki couldn't help but sense a tenseness in the atmosphere as he approached the throne. He bowed low and said, "I have returned."

Gyousou nodded and beckoned for Taiki to join him. Taiki got up and stood next to the throne. Strangely, he felt as if he'd come back to the place where he belonged.

"And how was Ren?"

"The flowers really were blooming there."

"Were they?" Gyousou smiled. "You can fill me in later." He said to the

Chousai, "The fine details can be confined to a written report. I know everybody else must be very tired. There's no need to dawdle here."

"Yes!" they answered with military precision.

When the Chousai had finished with his official duties, he congratulated Taiki. Sougen and the other delivered a simple account of their journey. As this was mostly a matter of going through formalities, Gyousou had the pearl-encrusted rattan blinds lowered, indicating that the audience with the king was over.

"You must be tired. We should call it a day. I'll take you to your room." Giving Taiki a gentle nudge, Gyousou left the Naiden.

"I'm okay. I'm not tired at all." There were mountains of things he wanted to talk about. "But I guess you do have work to do."

Gyousou chuckled. "Well, with Kouri finally coming home, I don't suppose anybody will mind if I take some time off."

Taiki immediately felt his spirits lifting.

"So what kind of people are the Royal Ren and the Ren Taiho?"

"They're really nice." Taiki grabbed hold of Gyousou's sleeve as they walked along and rattled off the details as quickly as he could. How they ended up barging into the Koukyuu, and how Seitaku's farm was smack dap in the middle of the Imperial Palace, and how in the morning Renrin came to deliver the wake-up call and air out the rooms and draw the water for them to wash up, and how this left Tansui and everybody all fit to be tied.

"The Royal Ren even let me help him when he was working on his farm—"

Gyousou interrupted him with a nudge to the back. "This way, Kouri."

"Eh?" said Taiki, glancing around. He was sure this was the right way to get back to Jinjuu Manor. He gave Gyousou a curious look.

Gyousou smiled. "This way."

"Um—okay."

Gyousou turned down the path to the Seishin. Assuming that's where they were headed, Taiki didn't give it a second thought. He prattled on about Urou

Palace and what Juurei looked like and where they stopped in Ryuu and Kyou and Han on the way there. A month to Taiki was like forever. Explaining what had happened in the meantime seemed to him a way of filling in the time he'd been gone.

"And then Seirai—"

Taiki suddenly stopped. Gyousou had been guiding him along and now he found himself in totally unfamiliar surroundings. Looking around, he could see the Seiden of the Seishin. Next to the Seiden on the western side was what appeared to be a building.

"And then Seirai—" said Gyousou.

They passed through the building and emerged into a small courtyard. Taiki stopped and stared. Tansui was standing at the gate to what Taiki took to be the main wing of the building. He thought that when they'd separated at the Forbidden Gate, Tansui had returned to Jinjuu Manor.

"What's the hold up?" Gyousou queried, giving Taiki a friendly push.

Taiki hurried into the building and uttered a surprised cry, finding there all the familiar trappings of his life, including the head housekeeper.

"What's going on?" he asked, turning to Gyousou. Before he'd left for Ren, Taiki recalled that Seirai had promised certain aspects of his life would see a "definite improvement" upon his return. "You mean, I'm moving here?"

"Assuming you haven't grown too fond of Jinjuu Manor."

Taiki couldn't avoid the fact that his face had flushed with delight. He would be right in the Seiden with Gyousou. That close. The Imperial Palace was so large that he normally couldn't say two words to Gyousou without taking a long hike. He'd always found it a disagreeable chore.

"But now it'll be a long way to your Provincial Offices in Koutoku Manor."

"That's fine with me. It won't be a problem if I hurry."

"Even hurrying, you still might not get there on time."

"Then I can run."

"That'd be an awful bother, day after day."

"It's okay. Besides, it'll be good for my health. I'm a growing boy, after all. This way I'll grow up even faster. Besides—"

Gyousou grinned. "You still don't like riding in a palanquin."

Taiki replied with a small nod. He just couldn't get used to the things. He felt he should be constantly apologizing to the people carrying him around on their shoulders. He could never relax in one.

"In any case, you'll become Tansui's pupil."

"Tansui's?"

"There's a colt waiting for you as well. Tansui will be your instructor."

"Really?" Taiki jumped up and down. "You mean, I get to ride a horse?"

"That's right. You've already mastered riding kijuu, but flying kijuu around the Inner Palace has long been against the rules. And you're a bit small to be handling a kijuu all by yourself. I suppose you could travel in a palanquin atop a horse as you did on your journey, but that seems a bit silly, now, doesn't it?"

Taiki was too delighted for words.

"You did a good job putting up with all that travel."

"It wasn't that bad. Really. And there were so many fun things to do. Is it really okay for you to reward me like this?"

Of course it is, Gyousou's smile said. He headed up to the second floor. There was a warm, brightly-lit room enclosed with glazed paneled doors. The whole expanse of the gardens was visible from the room.

"This isn't all on your behalf alone. I wished to have you closer as well."

Taiki's eyes opened wide. In that moment, he couldn't help feeling he'd imposed himself on Gyousou. He'd been so lonely that Gyousou had gone to such lengths to show he cared about him.

"But—" He didn't want to appear ungrateful. And yet that Gyousou had thought it necessary to express his concern with so grand a gesture weight on his mind.

He was searching for the right words to express how he felt when Gyousou smiled wryly. "I'm not one for letting things work themselves out on their own."

Gyousou found a chair, settled into it, and motioned to the one next to it. Taiki quietly sat down. Gyousou said, "There are those of us who prefer to strike when the iron is hot. It is not necessarily a vice. But riding with a loose reign has never been a strong point. So I think it best that I see more of you."

"Me?"

"Like when you first came to Hakkei Palace and couldn't go five minutes without wanting to know what that was or what this did—somebody to talk to on a regular basis. Some ballast to keep me on an even keel. Somebody to take the kettle off the fire when it's boiling over. Else I'm liable to go firing ministers right and left and otherwise getting ahead of myself."

Taiki looked up at Gyousou, unable to hide the flabbergasted expression on his face.

"What?"

Taiki shook his head.

"At any rate, we're going to kick back and relax while you catch me up to date on all your adventures. Gashin says that I've been so on edge of late that I'm scary to be around and pretty unapproachable."

"Gashin of the Zui Provincial Guard?" He'd previously been one of Gyousou's generals. Now he commanded the Zui Provincial Guard of the Right.

"He said being around me was like spending time with a hungry tiger."

Gyousou smiled wryly and Taiki grinned despite himself. Somehow or another, he had the feeling that this was exactly the case. He was Gyousou's watcher, and it was his job to make sure that the tiger got fed.

"Then I'll do my best to make sure that Gyousou-sama's stomach is always full."

"I'd appreciate it," Gyousou laughed. He suddenly raised his hand. "Ah, look at what else you brought back from Ren—"

"Eh?"

"Spring."

Taiki looked at where Gyousou was pointing. There was a big plum tree overhanging the balustrade just outside the window. Two small white flowers were blooming on the branch closest to them.

Tai's long winter was finally drawing to a close.

Jougetsu

he man stood beneath the symbol of Imperial power. "Any government that indulges itself will stray from the Way."

The throne's dais rested on four columns inlaid with gold and silver. The pearl blinds surrounding the throne were raised, but the throne itself was empty. Behind the bejeweled seat, a silver-white screen engraved with flying dragons illuminated the scene.

Following long-established precedent, the ministers knelt on the floor of the spacious Gaiden, their heads almost touching the weave of the carpet. They understood the seeming pointlessness of paying their respects to an empty throne, as did the man standing beneath the throne facing them.

"From the start, we valiant citizens of Hou, mere ministers and bureaucrats that we are, could not think ourselves free to do as we pleased, even when His Highness, the Royal Hou, was no longer with us."

The man speaking had all but seized power in the Kingdom of Hou, yet he placed his chair beneath the dais and under no circumstances would set foot upon it.

The man's name was Gekkei. The late Royal Hou had appointed him Marquis of Kei Province. Four years before, he had banded together with the other Province Lords to overthrow that same Royal Hou.

"In order to bring order to the Imperial Court, it became necessary to reach beyond our jurisdictions. Having brought chaos upon us, it was our duty to bring it under control. Four years have passed and the Imperial Court is now in order. After this, without exceeding our authority, without resorting to tyranny, we officials of the Court and the Kingdom shall, to the best of our abilities, manage the present situation and solemnly work toward the coronation of a new king."

Several of the ministers and officials in the broad hall arrayed before the empty

throne cast their eyes downward, as if in shame or self-reflection.

"Amend or abolish even one law and we usurp what is by right the power of the king. Sadly, many harsh laws established by His Highness continue to needlessly torment the citizens of Hou. In these cases, let the news go forth that no one need fear censure if they are not enforced. That is as far as we can allow ourselves to go. The responsibility for abolishing laws is better entrusted to the future king. Rashly eliminating and writing laws is not within the scope of our authority. Shouyou—"

The man he addressed lifted his head. Gekkei looked at him and said, "In the same way, after this, we must be careful about going beyond what has already been established. Nor do I foresee any scenarios which would require us to do so. While His Highness enacted many harsh laws, he dealt with corrupt government officials with equal severity. There is no denying that his anti-corruption campaigns crossed the line. But his efforts meant that Hou has largely escaped the poisonous snakes nurtured by depraved politicians. Despite this reduction in their numbers, there are yet ministers and officials of great virtue left to serve in the Imperial Court. We hope no further culling will become necessary. The duty of governing the Kingdom rests upon their shoulders. The duty given me is that of governing Kei Province, not the Kingdom. I firmly believe that a mere Province Lord inserting himself into Imperial matters would constitute straying from the Way. My continued presence in Youshun Palace should not be condoned. Do you beg to differ?"

Shouyou dropped his gaze. "A kingdom has need of a king."

"His Highness no longer lives."

"Somebody must stand at the head of the ministers to unite them, to engage in Imperial affairs with resolve and determination, put the laws in order, govern the citizenry, and guide the Imperial Court. Else the kingdom will continue to falter."

"There is no other lord of the ministers but the Royal Hou."

Shouyou looked up at Gekkei. "The Royal Hou does not sit upon the throne because we were left with no other choice but to commit regicide."

"Shouyou—"

"We do no deny that there is no greater sin than that. As a consequence, Hou today is a despised kingdom of outlaws. Only the Royal Kyou of the Kingdom of Kyou has recognized this government, and then only privately. It otherwise does not exist officially. And yet do you so despise the thought of leading it as well?"

"I have said nothing of the sort."

"Do you regret killing Chuutatsu?"

Gekkei averted his gaze.

"We killed the Royal Hou Chuutatsu. As regicides, we all bear that burden together. But I feel no shame for having done so. Not considering the lives lost to Chuutatsu's cruel laws and the suffering they caused. Call it the product of righteous indignation or a mere settling of scores—at least Chuutatsu no longer sits upon that throne. You, the Marquis of Kei, thought no differently. Isn't that why you turned your back to the Way and led this insurrection?"

Gekkei had no answer to Shouyou's question.

"To occupy the throne without a Divine Mandate would definitely constitute a *de facto* usurpation. Are you so afraid of being accused of stealing the crown? If so, then why plot this coup in the first place? If you raised an army and struck down the king out of compassion for his long-suffering subjects, then shouldn't that compassion require you to carry out the kingly duties on behalf of the people, the label of *pretender* notwithstanding?"

Hard-pressed to answer, Gekkei looked at the floor instead. At that moment, an undersecretary entered the room. He bowed and approached Gekkei and said something in a soft voice.

"The Kingdom of Kei—"

Gekkei eyes flew open. He spun around to face the undersecretary, his flustered gaze passing over Shouyou and the others. Excusing himself, he briskly left the Gaiden in the company of the undersecretary.

"A personal communiqué from the Royal Kei?" was his first question.

The undersecretary confirmed this with an affirmative nod.

"To me?"

He was a renegade who had trampled upon the Divine Rule of Law, assassinated the king, and usurped the throne. And yet he was being told that he'd received a communiqué from the rightful Empress of Kei. Not to mention that Kei and Hou enjoyed no diplomatic relations of any sort.

An emissary from Her Highness had arrived bearing correspondence addressed to him? The undersecretary nodded again, clearly no less befuddled than he was. Gekkei gathered his confused thoughts together and instructed the undersecretary to escort the emissary to the palace annex.

Chapter 2

Still dressed in his court robes, Gekkei repaired to the palace annex. With an unsettled air, he took his seat at the foot of the table and waited for the diplomatic mission to arrive.

The emissary was escorted in by the undersecretary. He was wearing rather plain ministerial dress, and his entourage appeared to be ordinary civil servants. Yet he identified himself as a general of the Palace Guard.

"This is not an official visit. I am here at the personal request of the Royal Kei."

With that announcement, the general refused the offer to be seated at the head of the table. "My name is Sei Shin, and I bear correspondence for the Marquis of Kei from Her Highness."

The man handed him the letter. Gekkei looked back and forth between the letter and the Kei General. "Please excuse me for asking this question, but are you sure that I am the intended recipient?"

Sei gave him a perplexed look. "I was instructed to deliver this to the Marquis of Kei."

"To me personally?" Gekkei pressed. "Not the kingdom?"

Sei answered, a skeptical tone creeping into his voice, "We had gathered that this kingdom was being governed by the Marquis of Kei. So the one would be the same as the other."

Gekkei sighed softly. "In that case, I cannot accept." After instructing the undersecretary to go get Shouyou, he said, "Please, make yourself at home. The Chousai will be with us presently."

"Ah," said Sei with a nod, though the conversation to this point had clearly befuddled him.

"I am nothing more than the Province Lord of Kei. Surely the general

understands that a marquis is naught but a marquis."

"Yes, well, that would be true." The troubled look on Sei's face did not diminish.

Gekkei could understand his confusion. An kingdom deprived of its king needed somebody to lead it. If a king simply lost the Divine Mandate and abdicated, the customary practice was for the remaining ministers to inaugurate a provisional government and appoint a provisional leader. If there was Chousai, then as the chief minister he would assume the throne. This would not be in name only. The Chousai would climb the dais and rule as king. Though the usual enthronement ceremonies would be omitted, the Chousai would in actuality occupy the throne.

In any case, a real throne was not the name of a chair that a king happened to occupy, but was the seat of power of he who led the kingdom.

If a king had not lost the Divine Mandate, then his replacement was a pretender. Kings who had not yet exhausted the Divine Mandate had previously been toppled by those with their own designs on the seat of power. Gekkei and his fellow conspirators could be counted among them. And there were certainly similar cases to found elsewhere of patriots committing acts of high treason in order to remove a wayward king, and with no thoughts of usurpation on their minds.

It'd always been the case that the chief architect of such schemes had been chosen to sit upon the vacant throne. It was the logical consequence of treason and regicide. Any person who could decide for himself that the king had strayed from the Way and deserved to be replaced by himself was in the very thought committing treason.

"Then I take it," Sei tentatively offered, "that the Marquis does not intend to stand as the provisional king?"

Gekkei drew his brows. The words struck at his heart with a force he hadn't expected. "This would be no reason for a provisional king. There exists no provisional court, you see."

No man who sat upon the throne as the result of revolution could boast of the Divine Mandate. The king with Heaven's blessing had been replaced by one who

lacked it, and thus was labeled a "pretender." A pretender's court was a counterfeit one.

"As much as I hate to say it, you would best call this a counterfeit court. The intent was never to replace the king."

The general nodded. He started to say something, and then quickly thought better of it.

"What was that? There's no need to hold back on my account."

"Well, if you wouldn't mind me saying so, I had good reason to believe the current King of Hou was the Marquis of Kei. Her Highness was operating under that assumption as well. The letter Her Highness entrusted to me is intended for His Royal Highness, the Marquis of Kei. It is not within my authority to deliver it to the Chousai instead. The state of affairs that you describe had not occurred to us."

Gekkei smiled bitterly. "Yes, I guess it would be natural for he who stole the king's life to steal his throne as well."

Sei shifted with obviously discomfort. "I wouldn't go that far—"

"I fomented the rebellion and murdered the king. But that does not mean I did so with any desire to rule in his stead. I am fully aware of the gravity of my sins, just as I know that this unworthy body of mine cannot be allowed to defile the throne."

At that moment, Shouyou hurried into the room. Gekkei continued, "I see the Chousai has arrived. If you would be kind enough to excuse me—"

He bowed and departed, brushing past Shouyou as he left the hall.

Chapter 3

Shouyou first saw the hard expression on Gekkei's face, and then the bewildered look on the face of visitor from the Kingdom of Kei, who was dressed in ministerial robes. He sensed the awkwardness in the air. But Gekkei's brisk exit afforded him no opportunity to call him back.

"I am the Chousai of the Kingdom of Hou. I thank you for taking the trouble to travel such a great distance to visit us."

He bowed, though he could tell that the attention of his opposite was still focused on the door Gekkei had just exited. The man's entourage as well buzzed with audible confusion.

"What—what was that?"

"I am truly sorry," Shouyou said with a nod of his head. "I fear I bear no small responsible for the mood of the Marquis at the moment."

The man knelt and bowed. "I am pleased to make your acquaintance. My name is Sei Shin, commander of the Kei Palace Guard.

"And I am pleased to welcome you here. You must be very taken aback by what has transpired so far."

"Not at all," Sei said with a smile. "I am sure the fault is my own. I must apologize to the Chousai as well. The fact of the matter is, Her Highness entrusted me with a letter that was to be delivered to the Marquis of Kei. Yet I gathered from the Marquis that the Chousai governs the Imperial Court. In that case, I suppose the letter should be delivered to you. Except that this correspondence touches upon a matter that concerns the Marquis personally. I am left in something of a quandary as to what to do next."

Shouyou sighed and shook his head. "Please make yourself comfortable and get what rest you need. Your aides-de-camp as well."

He called for the undersecretary and instructed him to provide quarters for the general's attendants and to see to it that they were taken care of. Then he led the general deeper into the annex, to a courtyard shadowed by a fresh growth of verdant green.

"You've arrived at the best time of the year in Hou. Please, have a seat. I'll have some refreshments brought."

"That would be fine."

The general followed him into the courtyard. The stone table there was situated to catch a refreshing breeze.

"It seems that I owe you an apology, General."

"Not at all. The error appears to be ours."

"It would be entirely logical of you to seek an audience with the Marquis. I'm sure you find this quite awkward. You having not so long ago installed a duly-appointed Empress in your Imperial Palace, and we—with the Marquis as our leader—having struck down our own king."

"I've been informed of the Royal Hou's mercilessly tyrannical actions toward his subjects."

Shouyou nodded. "I know it is an ugly truth to put forth, but during the reign of His Highness, six hundred thousand people were executed, often for the most trivial of sins."

"Six hundred thousand—"

It would be said in years hence that the land was covered with corpses. The arithmetic averaged out to at least one from every household in the kingdom.

"His Highness loathed sin. There could be no forgiveness, no matter how slight the offense. Pick a man's pocket or leave the fields at harvest to attend the fair—the death penalty attended both equally. That's the kind of place Hou was."

Sei did not challenge this information. He appeared to be well-informed on the subject.

"At last, the Marquis of Kei called together the other Province Lords and mounted an insurrection. We murdered our King. The Marquis led the alliance.

So it would be natural for you to assume that having deprived the King of his life and the throne, the Marquis would then occupy it. And we assumed the same."

Four years before, the other eight Province Lords answered Gekkei's call, as had Shouyou and the ministers. Chuutatsu was treading a path to extinction. They must arise and revolt. Chuutatsu and Queen Kaka were assassinated. Hourin was killed. The curtain of Chuutatsu's reign was rung down.

The disease was eliminated. But Chuutatsu had been the rightful ruler. When a king died, the kingdom soon followed him into the grave. Between Chuutatsu's ruinous reign and the fires of insurrection ignited by Shouyou and the rest of them, the Imperial Court was left in tatters. They had to somehow patch things together without worsening the era of the empty throne.

That had been the goal of the conspirators from the beginning. They had killed the king, sending the kingdom further along its downward path. So it was their duty to set things aright.

Nevertheless, once Gekkei, the leader of the revolution, had tied together the minimum number of loose ends, he passed the reins of government on to the Imperial bureaucracy (now half its original number), and retired to Kei Province.

"The Marquis hadn't the slightest desire to inherit the Kingdom. His goal all along was to stop the slaughter, not to become the substitute king or rule the Kingdom."

"And yet the news that reached our ears was that the Marquis of Kei was guiding the Imperial Court of Hou."

"That was how things evolved. The Marquis believes that, in the abstract, it is an offense against nature that we traitors should rule at all. The real world, however, begs to differ. Without the guidance of the Marquis, everything would unravel. Because he is the leader of our alliance. Having accepted that role, without his direction, the Court would cease to function."

Being abandoned by Gekkei amidst the chaos following the king's assassination had sent them reeling. They couldn't just come up with another leader. He had called up the ministers and Province Lords, and once the insurrection was accomplished, had organized their allies and directed what they should do. To lose such a critical element threw everything into confusion. Somebody had to

step into the role, but nobody stepped forward to shoulder the responsibility.

The opinions and expectations and complications multiplied. Nobody could get anything done at all. Shouyou finally penned a desperate petition calling for Gekkei's return, the one thing the Imperial Court *could* agree upon. In response to these frantic cries, Gekkei at last returned to the Imperial Palace. In the four years since then, the Kingdom of Hou had moved forward under his direction.

"However, the Marquis has sought no position for himself within the government. He refuses our nominations. He says that the job of running the government belongs to the ministers, and he will only help out where he can. In fact, the Marquis is the Province Lord of Kei and normally resides at his palace there. Only at certain critical junctures, and when we request his presence, does he come to Youshun Palace. It works out to him spending about half his time here. And yet—"

Youshou didn't finish the rest of the sentence. This traveler from Kei had no connection to Hou and certainly no connection to himself. Youshou knew better than to let his emotions get the better of him in such a situation. He simply shut his mouth to keep things under control.

"And yet?" Sei pressed gently. "Would it be rude of me to ask for more details? I came here bearing correspondence from the Empress. I cannot leave until I have delivered it."

Shouyou grasped his knees. "The Marquis is returning to Kei Province. His intention is to leave here for good."

"Which has the rest of you at loose ends."

"To say the least. No one else is qualified to govern Hou. And yet the Marquis orders me to make it so."

Four years had passed. The chaos was under control. The right people had been placed in the right positions. The Imperial Court was functioning as it should. Steps were being taken to provide help for the people. Goals were being accomplished. And if to end these accomplishments with an emphatic bit of punctuation, Gekkei broached the subject of a Chousai for the first time.

Youshou and the other enthusiastically agreed. Up till now, Gekkei had acted

as the Chousai in all but name. Filling the position in name as well as reality—a leader to lead this leaderless regime—would be far more appropriate. Or so all the ministers believed. Instead, Gekkei nominated Shouyou.

"The Marquis ordered me to become Chousai. Why should it be anyone but him? No one agreed with that decision. But we suppressed our outrage and did what he wanted. We had assumed—wrongly—that the Marquis was at last prepared to sit upon the throne."

Up till then, Shouyou and his colleagues had repeatedly entreated Gekkei to fill the empty throne. The Royal Kyou of the neighboring Kingdom of Kyou had recommended the same. But Gekkei soundly rejected the proposition. Now it seemed that he had at last changed his mind.

"If the Chousai was supposed to run the kingdom, then the Marquis ought to be doing so instead. But if he was to recommend someone like myself to be the Chousai, then I believed he must take the higher position for himself. He never explicitly denied that he might do so. Yet today, out of the blue, he stated he was leaving the capital and returning to Kei Province!"

Gekkei should have understood the extent to which the other ministers had misunderstood his recommendation. But he never once sought to correct those mistaken assumptions. When he thought about it now, Gekkei must have known this all along. Had the ministers grasped what was going on, they never would have agreed to appoint Shouyou Chousai.

He had not only failed to correct these mistaken beliefs, but from the start he had done his best—by omission—to foster them.

"He says that he is a Province Lord, not an Imperial minister, and his job is to govern his province, not the kingdom. While it may have been necessary to trespass upon that authority in order to calm the chaos, it would be impermissible for him, as a Province Lord, to trespass upon that authority in order to rule the kingdom. He's still sticking to that same old argument!"

Tears of rage and disappointment fell on the hands grasping his knees. Shouyou knew that he could not fill Gekkei's shoes. Gekkei had slain Chuutatsu and stopped the slaughter. The faith of the ministers and the people in him was absolute. To retreat to his province, even after appointing Shouyou Chousai—

both the people and the government officials needed someone to bind them together. All the more so there being no king to keep the kingdom from sliding into oblivion.

Shouyou couldn't deny the expectation that this was something only Gekkei could do, that they needed him to do. The same year they had struck down Chuatatsu, he had executed at least three-hundred thousands of his subjects, perversely spurred on by the *shitsudou* afflicting Hourin. Even then, Shouyou and his colleagues had hemmed and hawed. They pitied the people, they lamented the state of the Kingdom, but couldn't muster the courage to mention the word "regicide."

Gekkei was the only one who voiced the possibility, who took action. They saw nothing wrong in placing their faith and expectations in him. They believed that he would continue to lead them as he had during the insurrection. As far as the people were concerned, no matter what became of the Kingdom after this, they were sure that it was Gekkei who had saved them.

Nevertheless, Gekkei seemed determined to turn all that faith and all those expectations into futility.

Shouyou couldn't understand why he'd wallowed in such pain and misery up to now. Looking back on it now, when Gekkei returned to his palace in Kei Province following the uprising, his intentions had been clear. When he'd returned to the Imperial Palace in response to their entreaties, he'd declared he had no inclination of taking on any official Imperial position, and was there only to offer advice. He had not given up the title of Province Lord, nor shown the slightest interest in searching out a replacement.

In retrospect, there was no denying that Gekkei was a Province Lord through and through. Despite making his resolution on that matter clear, Shouyou and his colleagues had shut their eyes and covered their ears. Their failure to comprehend the true nature of the situation was their own.

He could grasp all this with his head. But not in his heart. He felt betrayed, tossed aside like a spurned lover. No matter how irrational his bitterness and anger, he could not be the only one who felt that way. In fact, when Gekkei had uttered those remarks at the Privy Council, the entire hall had all but frozen over.

After the undersecretary came to fetch Gekkei away, the place had erupted into wails of grief and outbursts of verbal abuse.

Gekkei had probably returned to the Gaiden. The remaining ministers would no doubt try to call him back. And none of their words would touch his heart—

With a start, Shouyou lifted his head. Flustered, he turned and found the Kei general gazing calmly at the courtyard. "I beg your pardon," Shouyou hastily apologized. "I drifted off there for a bit."

Sei looked at him and smiled. "What was that?"

"Nothing," Shouyou responded in a choked voice.

Sei nodded. "In any case, I seemed to have barged in at a quite inopportune time. I'm sorry for raising such a ruckus."

"Oh, no, nothing of the sort. I've been the one—"

"Then I guess the Chousai is the person to whom I should deliver this letter. Her Highness assumed that Hou was being governed by the Marquis, so its contents may not be entirely to your liking. But I would appreciate it if you would accept this on behalf of the Marquis."

Sei held out the letter. Shouyou was fit to be tied. "But—"

"Please feel free to pass it on to the Marquis. I'm sure Her Highness would not object."

Shouyou hesitated, but finally took the letter.

"I do not wish to impose on you further," Sei continued, "but I have another letter for the Chousai. Again, you might find its contents disagreeable, but I hope you would accept it."

"Not to be rude, but the substance of this letter?"

"It is from a lady of the Kei Imperial Court. It was intended for the Marquis as well. It would seem logical at the juncture to leave it in your hands. I know how presumptuous this may sound, but Her Highness wished both her letter and that of the court lady to be treated with equal gravity."

Shouyou gaped at him. Never before had a minister of Hou ever received a

communiqué from the Royal Kei, not to mention a letter from any lady of the Kei Imperial Court.

"General Sei, I—"

Sei calmly interrupted him. "The name of this court lady is Son Shou."

For a long moment, Shouyou couldn't place the name. He was about to ask who Son Shou was when it suddenly came to him: Chuatatsu's daughter, the Princess Royal Shoukei, who had been banished from the Imperial Palace. Shouyou felt his knees go weak from the shock.

"Shoukei-sama—she is living in Kei?"

"Yes." The general answered with a knowing smile that communicated his comprehension of the circumstances surrounding Shoukei. "I know I have placed all these burdens on your shoulders, but I would appreciate it if you could see that they are properly carried out."

Sei rose from his chair and bowed. Shouyou gripped the letters in both hands.
"General Sei, will you be returning to Kei at once?"

"I have carried out my orders. Having visited Youshun Palace in this informal capacity and delivered those letters, my mission has been completed. I've instructed the officers traveling with me to avail to take the opportunity to inform themselves about the condition of the kingdom, after which we will sojourn in the city below."

"If you are not in too much of a hurry, I would ask that you delay your departure for a while. I *really* must insist that you meet with the Marquis."

"But—"

"It was the Marquis who had the most concern for Shoukei's welfare. I'll go get him. Please."

The general agreed and Shouyou frantically called for the undersecretary.

Chapter 4

The Privy Council had already broken up. Gekkei was returning to his official residence. He was intercepted by the undersecretary, who informed him that Shouyuu desperately wished Gekkei to join him.

Gekkei didn't see the point in meeting with a foreign emissary at this juncture, but didn't think it wise to so openly disrespect a representative of the Kingdom of Kei.

When he entered the palace annex, the emissary and Shouyuu were in the courtyard. As soon as Shouyuu caught sight of him, he uttered the last name on earth Gekkei expected to hear. One that made his senses reel.

"Marquis, it's about Shoukei—"

Almost on their own, his feet picked up the pace. Rushing to Shouyuu's side, he was about to demand what this was about, when he caught himself and bowed to the emissary instead.

"I apologize for my abrupt manner earlier."

"Don't worry about it. I doubtless spoke out of turn myself, not knowing the true state of affairs here."

"Then Shoukei-sama is residing in Kei?" Gekkei looked back and forth between the two men.

Shouyuu handed him a letter. "It is from Shoukei-sama."

Gekkei waved his hand, signaling his reluctance to accept it. He was even more determined than the Chousai to have nothing to do with it. He turned to the general from Kei. "The Princess Royal was given over to the custody of the Kingdom of Kyou. Though I did hear that she had absconded."

"Yes. She lives in Kei, where she works as a royal scribe."

"Royal scribe," Gekkei murmured. The royal scribe worked in the Imperial Palace, in the proximity of the Empress, and helped her carry out her official duties—the lowest rank of civil servant who worked in that capacity.

"Yes," Sei confirmed, his voice equally soft. "Her Highness appointed her a royal scribe. Yet Shoukei is not a citizen of Kei. Her *koseki* still resides in Hou. We would like to request that her *koseki* be transferred to Kei."

Hearing Shoukei referred to in such a familiar manner, Gekkei turned to Sei. "General Sei, do you know Shoukei-sama?"

"Yes," Sei said, again with that knowing smile. "I hate to have to admit it, but not much time has passed since the coronation of the Royal Kei. The countryside has not been entirely pacified. During one particular incident, Shoukei proved herself quite useful."

"Shoukei helped the general?"

"Yes. Equally aware of the meritorious nature of her service, Her Highness strongly recommended that she be appointed a royal scribe. Shoukei is already listed upon the Registry of Wizards in Kei. However, because of the importance of maintaining cordial relations with Hou and Kyou, and the uncertain location of her permanent records, Shoukei's position cannot be made official, nor can she be promoted."

Gekkei took a deep breath. This girl had once been Chuutatsu's jewel in the crown, the only object of his love and affection. Protected in the depths of the Imperial Palace, insulated from the smell of the slaughter and the cries of the people, she was given everything she wanted on a silver platter.

After Chuutatsu was assassinated, her name was purged from the Registry of Wizards and she was exiled to a bleak village in Kei Province.

But her parentage was subsequently uncovered. The anger and bitterness of the villagers towards Chuutatsu could be quelled only by revenge. Gekkei sent to Kyou in order to keep her from being torn limb from limb. Resenting her treatment there, Shoukei had run away. That was the last he'd heard of her.

"After she fled Kyou, we heard rumors of jewelry being stolen from the Imperial Repository. Perhaps the general is better informed about the truth of

the situation."

"What you have been told is true. Unless and until we are granted a pardon by the Royal Kyou, Shoukei cannot officially become a civil servant of Kei."

"And knowing all this, the Royal Kei nevertheless invited Shoukei-sama into the Imperial Palace?"

When the news came that Shoukei had gone on the lam, Gekkei had been deeply disappointed. He had to conclude that—regardless of whether she'd even been cognizant of the privileged life she'd been born to—in the end, she hadn't grasped the true nature of the duty that she carried on her shoulders.

The general smiled, seemingly able to divine the reason for Gekkei's consternation. "People can change. Thankfully."

"But of course," Gekkei answered shortly. Next to him, Shouyou was still holding out the letter. Gekkei went to take it, then reconsidered. "If that letter is intended for the ruler of Hou, then I cannot accept it."

"But—" Shouyou started to say.

Instead, Sei said, "Perhaps you should hang on to it for the time being. It was my decision to give to you in the first place."

Shouyou answered with a dejected nod and lowered his arm. Gekkei glanced at Sei. "Will the general be staying with us for a while, perhaps?"

"We will stay in Hoso. My mission is complete, but my colleagues still have work to do."

"The Imperial guest quarters could be made available," Gekkei said, turning to Shouyou.

Sei raised his hand. "No, that is not necessary. Her Highness knows that Hou is in dire straits and asked us not to place any further demands on the Imperial treasury."

"I see," Gekkei said.

Even though this was an informal visit, having an emissary from another kingdom take a room at an inn in the capital seemed excessively disrespectful.

At the same time, with the Royal Hou no longer with them, large sections of the Imperial Palace had been shuttered. After cleaning up the vestiges of the revolution and putting things in order, buildings unrelated to government functions were locked up. Courtesy dictated that the personal emissary of another kingdom should be housed at the guest palace. But it hadn't been used in a long time, and there wasn't nearly enough time to get it ready.

"In that case, if you wouldn't mind, I would ask you to stay at my official residence as my personal guest. I understand the general had intended to visit with me in the first place. Though I cannot accept the Royal Kei's personal correspondence, it would be unconscionable of me to allow you to leave as things stand right now. The trappings are somewhat spartan, though."

Shouyou added, "We would really appreciate it."

The general smiled. "Well, then. If it's not an imposition, I shall take you up on the offer. But seeing that my colleagues have other business to take care of, please allow them to stay in Hoso."

Chapter 5

When Gekkei stayed at Youshun Palace, he used a manse tucked away in a corner of the Seishin. It was close to the Sea of Clouds, the smallest building in the compound. It would have otherwise made for cramped quarters, but as he kept his retinue to a bare minimum, it was quiet and airy.

"I apologize for the plainness of the accommodations," Gekkei said to Sei, as he escorted him through the twilight.

This wasn't false humility. From the front gate through the building to the patio, there wasn't a single scroll or wall hanging to be seen. Only the bare necessities. Gekkei had informed the few servants that a guest would be arriving, so some flowers had been arranged, lanterns lit, and wine and tea set out. Despite the bleak surroundings, the results were not off-putting.

"I heard from the Chousai that you were preparing to vacate the premises. Such preparations are underway, I take it?"

Gekkei offered Sei one of the chairs on the patio overlooking the garden. "Yes, but this was never intended to be anything but temporary quarters."

"Making the round trip from here to Kei Province must be a considerable inconvenience."

"Not at all," Gekkei said with a thin smile. He poured Sei a cup of tea. The evening breeze carried with it the scent of a nearby lake. The moon rising in the purple sky skimmed the roof of the patio.

"It's not that far riding a kijuu over the Sea of Clouds. The prime minister and the Rikkan hold down the fort when I'm gone, but it is a lot to impose on them."

"And yet you have no desire to rule the kingdom."

Gekkei's hand froze as he poured the tea. "Naturally. I have trampled the Mandate of Heaven. I could not possibly assume a throne that was not rightfully

given me."

"If that is true for you, then it would be just as true for everyone else who would rule in your stead. If you reject this calling and leave the Imperial Palace behind, wouldn't the ministers—beginning with the Chousai—have to follow suit? The Kingdom of Hou would soon fall apart."

Gekkei smiled bitterly. "So the general wishes me to become a usurper as well?"

"When you put it that way, perhaps I do. But I think you're going overboard. You've put the Chousai in a real bind. He doesn't believe he can hold things together. I have the feeling he's exaggerating just like you. But the fact remains that if you abandon the Palace because of *your* crimes, you are more or less implying that those you leave behind are blind to theirs. Neither your equally guilty colleagues nor the people you serve seem to agree with that assessment."

Gekkei offered Sei the tea. "I hadn't thought about it in exactly those terms, but you may have a point. In any case, I don't see the ministers fleeing the capital in significant numbers. Which is why, as the ringleader, I can take the fault all upon my own head. As the original guilty party, that should be my responsibility."

"I suppose so." Sei tilted his head to the side. "While I can't argue with your logic, neither do I agree with it. Your argument—that you led the insurrection and so you bear the original sin—doesn't sit right with me."

"Treason is not a sin? I cannot imagine you making such a claim before the Royal Kei."

"Not in a million years," Sei said, with a wave of his hand. "I'm not saying it isn't a sin. Just that, considering the late Royal Hou—"

Gekkei nodded. "His Highness certainly did execute many of his subjects for breaking the law. No matter how trivial the offense, the death penalty was always the verdict, and the grave the end result. No consideration was given to circumstances. Leniency was out of the question. A single infraction was the same as a death sentence."

"I have heard as much."

"His Highness was a stubborn idealist. If he was willing to put his life on the line in his pursuit of righteousness, he saw no reason to demand any less of his subjects. He came to categorically believe that no matter how minor the offense, everyone should agree that every sin deserved the death penalty."

Gekkei smiled painfully. "Prior to the accession of His Highness, I had occupied a position at the lowest rungs of the bureaucracy. During the time that the throne was vacant, the Imperial Court was a cesspool. Only His Highness remained clean and pure. Even when swords were brandished in his face, he made it clear he would choose death over dishonor."

"That is quite impressive."

"Earning his trust became synonymous with living a sinless life. Any man with a true heart esteemed that trust over any promise of fame and fortune."

Those who respected Chuutatsu were elated by his accession. They looked forward to a world ruled according to justice and virtue, to creating a kingdom governed according to the Rules of Heaven and bound according to the rule of law.

"We set out to create a world uncontaminated by the slightest speck of corruption. Not even the slightest hint of iniquity would be allowed. Sadly, Chuutatsu was never able to translate this image in his mind into reality."

"The image in his mind—"

"Chuutatsu *was* the kind of man he imagined himself to be. Despite this—or because of it—unrepentant ministers were given a free rein. As long as they deferred to him in the proper manner and mouthed the things he wanted to hear, he convinced himself they must be as righteous as he. As he had no ulterior motives and no hidden agendas, he assumed that those who looked pure on the outside must be pure on the inside. You could call it a noble failing of sorts."

And the worst of them all was Chuutatsu's wife, Kaka. The face she showed him was one of unbesmirched beauty. Her heart was as black as coal.

"His Highness had every intention of creating a pure and proper kingdom and became increasingly incensed by the impure and improper world he was faced with. The laws became more draconian, the penalties more severe. And when

the Taiho fell ill, His Highness grew even more frantic in his quest to make things right."

"He was going to make things right with law and punishment?"

Gekkei nodded and smiled grimly. "Up till the very end, it never seemed to dawn on him that he was going to lose the throne and his life because of the shitsudou. In that sense, he was utterly selfless in his devotion to justice as he perceived it."

Except that death swept the country like a plague. The reckless Chuutatsu made no effort to protect his own interests. His quest had been perverted into a pursuit of martyrdom in the name of justice. The terror turned indiscriminate.

"If it went on, I feared that the people of Hou would go extinct. I do not exaggerate. At the rate that things were falling apart, there soon would be no one left to execute. Somebody had to put a stop to it."

Gekkei was not trying to steal the throne. He never once thought of removing Chuutatsu in order to replace him—simply that there was no other way to stop him.

"And once I had stopped him—in the worst way possible—my duty was done. Or so I thought. Under normal circumstances, we would be tried and convicted as traitors. Or erased from the Registry of Wizards. But do that, and as you said, there would be no one left to run the kingdom. The best I can do to make recompense is retire to my provincial palace. Do you find that so strange?"

The Kei general only gave him a long and hard look.

"What?"

"Oh, nothing. The Chousai filled me in about the Royal Hou, but only the rough outlines. He left me with quite a different impression."

"A different impression?"

"Based on what I heard from the Chousai, I'd formed the image of a hard, cruel man. But after listening to what you had to say, I can see that it's not that simple." Sei nodded to himself. "You seem to be saying that the Royal Hou was something other than an unpardonably bad man. So perhaps that is source of

your guilt?"

"I wouldn't disagree with that." But even as he spoke, Gekkei had the feeling that Sei was saying something entirely unexpected. He still stood convicted by his crimes. But somehow "guilt" didn't quite describe what occupied his thoughts. At the same time, to deny it was indeed guilt felt like a lie as well.

He was lost in his thoughts until Sei's words hit home again. The general said, a faint smile on his lips, "I guess I have a pretty straightforward view on life. I'm fine by whatever's best for the people. If that means taking down a king that's oppressing the people, I'm fine with that too. Our rulers exist for the good of the people, the same way soldiers like ourselves exist to fight. A soldier who can't fight should find something else to do. And if he can't admit it to himself, then his friends and officers should make him see the light. I think it's the same with kings and empresses, though it's even harder for them to face the truth about themselves."

"I am a coward."

"That's not what I meant. I'm from Baku Province in the Kingdom of Kei. To tell the truth, I'm a hanjuu."

Gekkei blinked at this sudden confession. "A hanjuu? And a general?"

"Yes. Before the reign of Her Highness, hanjuu could not serve in the government. Naturally that included generalships. As foot soldiers, yes, but they could not rise through the ranks. Yet I was appointed to the Baku Provincial Guard."

"Despite being unable to win promotions?"

"The Province Lord of Baku said he didn't care. The previous empress had expressed little interest in matters of government at all. Civil servants busily fattened themselves at the expense of the people. They couldn't care less what the Province Lords were up to, so neither did my liege care."

Sei chuckled. "A bit of forgery, an unfortunate tear in the koseki record where my hanjuu status was mentioned. Nobody was bound to check anyway, my lord said. And if persons in high places did take a second look, it'd be passed off as a clerical error, or a case of mistaken identities. And if somebody got really

insistent, then a little money might change hands and that'd be the end of it."

"But—that's—"

"Yes, doing the wrong thing for the right purpose. Letting the ends justify the means. I couldn't help questioning his character at first. But even the Baku Province Lord shrank from striking the Late Empress directly."

A firm expression came to Sei's face. "I believe he was truly conflicted. In particular, after the Late Empress ordered that all the women be driven from the land. In one way or another, they nevertheless chose to remain. When this became apparent and the word came down to arrest and execute them, his consternation only deepened. Baku Province faces the Blue Sea, and the women to be exiled gathered in the port towns. Nobody wanted to leave. But they would be killed if they remained, and so they had no choice but look toward foreign shores. This grieved the Baku Marquis considerably, and he concocted excuses like the ships weren't rigged and there weren't enough of them. Or everybody was willing but weren't able to go all at once. Or they were just waiting their turn and these things took time. He made up excuse after excuse, all the while stiffening the defenses around the port towns. Luckily, things resolved themselves before anybody's bluff was called. But that he would go to such lengths must have meant he was resolved in his own mind."

After this soliloquy, Sei craned his head to the side, as if unsure about what he had just said.

"Or rather, when push came to shove, he was resolved to consider the possibilities. He never once talked about actually targeting the Late Empress. Yes, when I think back about it now, the one remaining question was how the Baku Marquis would react if the women he was protecting were killed. Listening to your story, I have the feeling that was the one thing he was not willing to do."

"You think so?"

"I thought so at the time. Perhaps because regicide is such a drastic step. My lord had every intention of saving his people. But no intention of seizing the throne for himself and calling himself king. I remember thinking at the time that it's not the kind of thing a man can do unless he's got that burning desire in the gut."

He gave Gekkei a smile. "But you *did* decide."

Gekkei was momentarily at a loss for words.

"If the Province Lord had told me to assassinate the Late Empress, I probably would have saluted and followed orders. But I don't think I could have acted on my own. While I certainly *thought* that the suffering of the people demanded that something be done, that was a decision better left to the Province Lord. And if he commanded it, I don't think I would have given it a second thought. Nor do I believe I would have worried about it afterwards or blamed myself. Not just because my commanding officer would have born the responsibility. Fact is, I'm not as smart as guys like you. The moral import of what I was doing simply wouldn't have sunken through my thick skull."

"I don't know if I would—"

Sei shook his head. "That's what it comes down to. Though I don't think it makes it any less grievous a sin. What I mean to say is, I didn't harbor the specific intent or grasp the enormity of what we were contemplating. But ignorance of the law by itself can constitute just as serious a crime. I could even accept that committing such a sin without comprehending its nature doubles its severity. To resolve yourself with a clear understanding of what the act entailed speaks to the thought you must have given it."

Sei faced Gekkei and said with a kindly expression. "It says a lot about how much you cared for the people. And that is that kind of person who ought to sit on the throne."

Gekkei kicked his chair back and stood up. "That's not it."

"It's not?"

"I can't see dressing up what we did in such refined motives. I killed the man who bore the Mandate of Heaven. Despite the infirmed state of the Taiho, despite High Highness's apparent lack of a desire to reclaim the Mandate, the possibilities of him doing so were not zero. Yet deciding for myself—sight unseen—that things would only get worse, I assassinated the King."

Sei glanced at Gekkei, a confused expression on his face.

"In any other case of high treason, there would be nothing admirable about

what I did. The ministers, the generals, and even the Royal Kyou want me to take the throne. And if I do, then I really would have stolen the throne from His Highness. I didn't kill him because I wanted his position. If other methods had availed themselves—"

Gekkei suddenly stopped speaking. Growing ever more agitated and he spoke, he felt his words becoming twisted and tangled in his head.

The look on Sei's face didn't change. With a quizzical expression he said, "Was what you did a simple case of high treason? Supposing that it was, weren't you left with no other recourses and forced to act?"

"Without a doubt," Gekkei groaned, covering his face with hands as he again took his seat. "I'm sorry. I'm not exactly expressing myself coherently."

"Not at all," Sei answered softly. A long minute later he said to himself, "But of course." When Gekkei raised his head, he gazed at him as if catching in his features the sight of something sad and painful. "You must have really revered the Royal Hou."

Chapter 6

Gekkei cast his thoughts back four years, back to a time when he couldn't admit to himself how far Chuutatsu had fallen. *How can you drag yourself through the mud like this?* he'd wanted to scream at him. *How can you besmirch the honor of the throne?*

The unvarnished truth was that Chuutatsu was the worst enemy of the people. His laws were excessively harsh and his punishments excessively severe. Gekkei had feared that if things went on unabated, Chuutatsu would surely loose the Mandate of Heaven.

The Taiho's illness was already undeniable.

If it had been in Gekkei's power, he would have steered Chuutatsu back to the Way. But at every turn, Chuutatsu only piled on more harsh laws and made the situation more dire.

"At that rate, I truly believed the people of Hou would soon go extinct."

Beneath the patio and beyond a small garden, the Sea of Clouds sparked in the moonlight. Below the Sea of Clouds, the faint lights from the world below spread out toward the horizon. The ground had once been covered with corpses. Instead of the flowers in the spring, the smell of rotting flesh. Elegies instead of traditional folk songs.

Has the King lost every last shred of humanity? Gekkei raged within himself. The ever-growing graveyards horrified him. The King's actions aroused feelings of bitterness and disgust. And yet Gekkei couldn't find it himself to hate him personally. He was the pure and undefiled minister he had once been, the one righteous man in the corrupt Imperial Court.

"I wanted His Highness to return to the man he had once been. That was the hope I clung to. But he continued to defy those expectations. I came to believe that it would have been better if he'd been corrupted by the trappings of power

from the start. Then I would have expected nothing of him. But he was a selfless ascetic to the end."

"So you resorted to the high crime of treason because you had no other avenues open to you?"

Gekkei nodded. "Saying that I acted on behalf of the good of the people is probably just an excuse. What actually goaded me into action was the pain that came from loathing somebody I did not want to loath. It wasn't a matter of righteous indignation. More a matter of personal enmity. That's what makes this a run-of-the-mill sin, no matter how fancy a name it goes by."

"And yet weren't you brought to such hatred for the Royal Hou out of your compassion for the people of Hou? It was your pity for the people that bred such loathing."

Gekkei shook his head. "I don't think so. It's not that their suffering wasn't on my mind. While watching people get hauled off to the gallows for crimes that barely qualified as misdemeanors was indeed painful, far more trying for me was witnessing the bitterness their survivors bore toward His Highness. Such hate being completely natural and comprehensible only made it all the more unbearable."

"Unbearable that the Royal Hou should be so hated?"

"Yes. I am not the ally of the common folk that my followers want me to be."

"But didn't you make yourself their ally in any case? You wanted the Royal Hou to do right by the people, didn't you? By making their lives better through compassion and wisdom, they would in turn love him."

This observation caught Gekkei by surprise. "I wouldn't say you're wrong."

"You wanted the people to love the Royal Hou as much as you once had. To that extent, you were on their side. Their peace was your peace. Their happiness was your happiness. A good king was a king who did the best he could for the people. That that's what you wanted on behalf of the Royal Hou?"

When Gekkei didn't answer, Sei added with a smile, "As far as I'm concerned, that's the same as acting on behalf of the people."

His eyes downcast, Gekkei answered, "But if I elevate myself to that position, then I would have in fact stolen it from His Highness."

He hadn't been able to remonstrate with Chuutatsu. And when Chuutatsu strayed from the Way, hadn't been able to bring him back to the straight and narrow. And so he struck him down out of personal enmity. To then take that which had belonged to his liege and make it his own would be the greatest theft of all.

"A literal usurpation. No room for excuses."

"Excuses? Who must you excuse yourself to?" Gekkei didn't reply. Sei continued, "From my perspective, it seems that you are mistaken about to whom you should be offering explanations." Sei immediately retracted the statement. "Sorry. I was letting my mouth get ahead of my head there."

Gekkei shook his head. He pressed his hands against his temples. "Your assessment is correct. It is His Highness to whom I wish to explain myself, to say that I did not kill him for mean or malicious motives. No matter how despised or detestable he might have become, my intent was not to usurp the throne. That is the apology I would offer. But I would definitely be offering it to the wrong person."

If he was to apologize, it should probably be to Heaven or to the people. He had trampled on the Will of Heaven, and that sin had robbed Hou of Divine Grace. That what he should apologize for—or at least that was what his head told him.

"No matter how many explanations or apologies I offer, His Highness will not be there to offer absolution. No matter how well I understand this, it is still the justification I wish to offer, probably nothing but a way of explaining myself to myself. If I add to that an actual usurpation of the throne, those explanations as well would be pointless. And now Shoukei-sama—the last person on earth who would ever forgive me."

If anything, the Princess Royal would have a good laugh at his expense. *You are the traitor who killed the King and stole the throne.* She'd already concluded that he'd taken everything that had once been hers out of spite and jealousy.

Sei asked in obvious confusion, "Shoukei would never forgive you? Why?"

"Are you serious?"

"I don't see how it is important whether Shoukei forgives you or not. But now that you mention it, I would ask you to keep in mind that I did come here to see you. Shoukei was the one who identified you as the ruler of Hou. There was no provisional king when she last resided in Hou, but she was sure that by now the position would have been filled. That is why Her Highness addressed her correspondence to you. Shoukei was sure that as long as the Marquis was in charge, things in Hou wouldn't spin out of control."

Gekkei stared at Sei in amazement.

"That's why Her Highness told me to come here and see what was going on, in order to find out what the Marquis was doing to keep the kingdom intact." Sei smiled at the speechless Gekkei. "I understand how you could hate yourself for striking down the man you revered. Yes, a crime is a crime. However, keeping chaos at bay is as much according to the Way as is repentance."

Sei looked up at the hazy moon rising over the garden. "When the sun sets and the roads are shrouded in darkness, the moon appears to show us the way."

There was a halo around the moon and the faint light shining down on them was tinged with a cold and melancholy gloom. Hardly an equal with the noonday sun. But enough to serve as a guide.

Next to him, Sei raised his voice. "What about a moonlight court?"

Gekkei blinked, not getting what he meant. Sei grinned. "It's inconvenient speaking only of a 'provisional court' or a 'pretender's court.' Say we call a court where the king occupies the throne a 'daylight court' and a court without a king a 'moonlight court.' Working by the light of the moon, we await the dawn."

"Of course," Gekkei said, smiling in turn.

Chapter 7

Tendrils of mist crept through a ravine. The faces of rocky ridges jutted out of the smoky haze. Here and there a mountain stream coursed down the slopes to a small pavilion, where it emptied into a deep pool.

Gekkei sat by himself at his desk in the study and studied the scene that appeared to him inside the box.

It was etched onto an inkstone the size of his two hands put together. The stone was a celebrated product of the Shun Kingdom. It was laced with lines of jade and embedded with a marble-like mottling that resembled scattered clouds. The valley descended beneath the shrouded skies and the pavilion watched over the deep, dark waters of the well of the inkstone, where a setting moon peered back.

The mottled, cloud-like patterns seemed to float in the channel of the inkstone where the ink stick was scraped back and forth. On the opposite side was etched a poem lauding the craft of calligraphy.

But it—and the stone itself—was neatly split in two.

Gekkei examined the fissure running through the stone. He could still remember the sound of the shattered stone, a sound so beautiful it was painful.

The inkstone was a gift from the Royal Hou Chuutatsu on the occasion of Gekkei being appointed Province Lord of Kei. Some ten years later, he broke the stone. Now useless, ruined even as a centerpiece, he'd set the fragments aside. It was the same as discarding it, as there was no way to return it to its original form.

He'd known that and destroyed it anyway upon receiving the news that in excess of one hundred "criminals" had been executed at the castle gates. Most of these "sinners" were guilty of nothing more grievous than "sloth," of shirking their duties or abandoning their fields. Their individual circumstances—an illness

in the family, a friend in need—was never taken into account.

In order that sin be truly shunned, the sin must truly be despised. The citizens of the capital were ordered to gather at the city gates and stone the sinners to death. Then the corpses were beheaded and their bodies left to rot in the sun.

When this news reached him, Gekkei broke the inkstone in a rage. The clear, high sound of the shattering stone echoing in his ears, he set off on a path from which there would be no turning back.

He'd never regretted raising the army. But he did regret that he ever had to do it, that he wasn't able to stop Chuutatsu before the dynasty began to crumble. Chuutatsu had entrusted Gekkei with this high position, and he'd repaid that debt with treason. And he hated himself for it.

Chuutatsu was undeniably the Royal Hou, and the throne was his alone. Unable to stop him from straying from the Way, Gekkei had turned against him, and waving the banner of his righteous cause, assassinated him. He'd come to believe that taking what had been Chuutatsu's would be unforgiveable.

There was no greater crime than regicide. The broken inkstone remained as a symbol of that singular fact. Just as the inkstone could never again return to its original purpose and form, having trampled on the Divine Will, Gekkei could never wash the blood from his hands. He could say it was all for the people and for the kingdom. But every time he looked at cruel fissure in the inkstone, the reality that it was nothing more than mean and willful destruction was again driven home.

The faint sound of footsteps interrupted his thoughts.

Shouyou appeared in the doorway. "I thought maybe you were looking for me. There was a servant waiting at my residence when I got back from the office."

He stepped into the study. Even in the lamplight, he could see that all of Gekkei's personal books and other effects had been piled up in a corner of the room. He was already getting ready to clear out of the place. Seeing Gekkei's will so physically manifested was terribly depressing.

The study's owner laughed softly. "And so you came all the way over here? Sorry about that."

"No problem," Shouyou muttered to himself. His eyes fell on the object in Gekkei's hand. "That is—"

"Yes, the gift I received from His Highness."

"Ah," exclaimed Shouyou. "When I was appointed Minister of Heaven, I received a similar inkstone."

"Do you still have it?"

Shouyou reacted with a troubled smile. "I do. I've tried to throw it away on many occasions, but could never bring myself to."

"Same here." Gekkei closed the lid of the box and carefully placed it back on the shelf. "Whenever His Highness gave one of his retainers a gift, it was always an inkstone, brush, paper or ink."

"Indeed it was," Shouyou agreed, feeling a strange twinge of nostalgia.

The look must have shown on his face, for Gekkei raised his wine glass. "What do you say, Shouyou?"

"Wasn't there something you needed me for?"

"I think this qualifies," Gekkei replied, offering Shouyou a glass.

"Then I accept. What about General Sei?"

"He's resting. We talked for quite a while. Afterward he begged off saying that he was exhausted. He retired to his room without eating dinner. I'm afraid I left a lot on his mind to think about."

Shouyou leaned forward. He didn't quite see the connection between having a lot on one's mind and going to bed early. Neither could he tell whether Gekkei was paying no attention to his state of mind or hadn't noticed his dubious reaction. A warm expression on his face, Gekkei placed the wine glass in his hand.

"His Highness didn't care for spirits either. He had no fondness for luxuries of any sort. Whatever he gave his retainers, it would not be gold or jewels."

"Indeed. Though an expertly-made inkstone easy costs the same as a fine gemstone." Shouyou smiled faintly. "The generals of the Palace Guard were

taken aback to receive ink stones as gifts. Probably because they had no idea of their actual value. And even if they did, the idea of receiving the object as a gift itself was surprising enough."

"Undoubtedly," Gekkei agreed with a smile. He filled Shouyou's glass. "Not just the inkstone and ink, but high-grade brushes and paper. Stationery was the only luxury His Highness allowed himself. He couldn't be bothered with fashion or the extravagances of interior décor. His wife apparently did not share his ascetic nature, though."

"No, she did not," Shouyou said with a nod.

Chuutatsu deplored extravagance and pomp. Queen Kaka made a good show of living the simple life, but when it came to her personal affects, only the very best was good enough for her. She did nothing in half-measures.

"It appears His Highness had no idea what it was his wife was adorning herself with. Otherwise, I would have expected him to criticize her just as he did the rest of us. But because her accoutrements did not *look* gaudy and extravagant, he assumed she must be as frugal as he."

Gekkei nodded. "His Highness was always willing to see the best in people like that."

Shouyou gave Gekkei a curious look. He could almost swear Gekkei was getting wistful.

As if taking note of Shouyou's expression, Gekkei raised his eyes and smiled. "You still loath His Highness, Shouyou?"

The memory of Chuutatsu's coronation suddenly rose to his thought, as vivid as a blow to the chest. "I can't say I loath the man he was. Though I have no regrets about raising an army and fighting against him, I regret that it ever became necessary."

"I wouldn't disagree with that. To tell the truth, I still find the whole thing an awful waste."

"You too?"

"I try my best to put it behind me, but when the countenance of His Highness

rises into my thoughts, I find it difficult to tolerate."

That longing for what Chuutatsu had once been, Shouyou stated bluntly, was why he couldn't discard his own inkstone, however often his anger had prompted him to do so.

Gekkei answered with a chagrined smile. "It is strange. I never hated the Queen as I did the King. She lied, slandered, and bore false witness. Yet I didn't think her irredeemable. When it came to sheer malicious intent, she was many times his superior. But all her scheming never aroused in me the anger that His Highness's ruthlessness did."

"Really? I did consider her irredeemable. It was she who spurred him on. That made my blood boil. In all honesty, I thought you soft for merely exiling the Princess Royal to Kei Province. I would agree that, isolated as she was within the Imperial living quarters, none of her father's sins could be laid directly at her feet. But her crimes of omission struck me as just as grievous. Though that was likely more my temper getting the better of me, wondering why she had done nothing to make him see the light."

"Your temper—"

"That's the way it seems to me now. Yes, I wanted to make His Highness see the light. I wanted him to be a good King. But he kept sinking deeper into the mire. I wanted to stop him and couldn't. Say that the penalties are too severe, the witch hunts too excessive, and he'd take it to mean you wanted nobody punished for anything. He'd dismiss you as a nuisance."

"He said as much to me."

Shouyou nodded. All the nostalgia from a few minutes ago evaporated, leaving a hole behind in his heart. "And if a man of valor, a favored retainer, would say such things, then how much more degenerate his subjects must be—that's what he said as he turned the screws all the tighter. Every admonition was taken as indicative of a worsening state of affairs. Beyond a point, I couldn't bring myself to remonstrate with him. All I could do was hope for someone else to do what I could not."

"And hence your anger. The Queen and Princess Royal refused to rise to the moment."

"That would be it," Shouyou said with a nod. "I fear the bitter truth of the matter was that even if they had remonstrated with him, he wouldn't have budged an inch. It was possible that those closest to him would have aroused an even worse outcome. That's certainly the way things turned out with the Taiho. The more the Taiho contended with His Highness, the harsher the laws became. Not even the shitsudou dissuaded him from the course he'd charted for himself."

"Unfortunately not."

"I understood what was at the root of those feelings. But I still despised the Queen and Princess Royal. It wasn't hard to do. There was already no greater pain than hating His Highness, that sense of loathing that came from asking myself why he had driven me into this corner. If he could just show the people a little mercy, I believed all those feelings would evaporate. More loathing only invited more pain, and that pain turned into more hatred. Yes, compared to that, what I felt for the Queen and Princess Royal was a mere trifling."

"Absolutely."

There were echoes of pain in Gekkei's voice, a tone of voice that told Shouyou why he so adamantly refused to take up the reins of royal authority. "This has all got to have been pretty tough for you."

The necessity of killing Chuatatsu. And the necessity of living with it afterward. He couldn't simply pile on one disloyalty after another on top of that.

"I am beginning to understand where you've been coming from. Still, I would ask that you understand where we are coming from as well. You were the only person who could have stopped him. To the ministers and to the people, you are the person who stopped the unbearable suffering and saved us all. When you announced that you were retiring to Kei Province, they couldn't help but become enraged with grief."

Gekkei took a breath and let it out. He looked at Shouyou. Shouyou continued, "So I'm asking you not make us go through that all over again." Shouyou stood and took the two letters from his pocket and held them to him. "Here."

"Shouyou—"

"General Sei asked if I would pass them on to you. I really think you should

read them. I'm not the person they were intended for. They belong in your keeping. Please—"

He placed the letters on the desk next to the box that held the inkstone. Then he bowed and left the study, leaving Gekkei alone with his thoughts.

Chapter 8

Gekkei stared at the two letters sitting on his desk for a long time. Finally he picked them up and opened them.

The letter from the Royal Kei began with a brief introduction, and then went onto explain how Shoukei came into her employ. The Empress hoped that he would read Shoukei's letter and somehow be able to put aside old resentments. Unfortunately, the chaos in Kei had not yet abated and they had no resources to spare on Hou's behalf. Nevertheless, she would pray for Hou's welfare.

Even when a government enjoyed the Mandate of Heaven, difficulties could flourish. All the anxieties that arose from the concerns about the physical realm and the people simply could not be erased. And how much worse they must be in a kingdom without a king.

A young and inexperienced empress such as herself could offer no meaningful advice or worthwhile assistance. But if there was any way that Kei could prove helpful, however small, she asked that he inform her emissary about the particulars.

"A friendly pat on the back—"

Gekkei spoke without self-reproach or irony. The straightforward tone of the letter touched his heart. Her signature was in a different hand than the rest, which had obviously been transcribed by an experienced scribe. He sensed a slight hesitancy in the brush stroke, as if the signature itself symbolized the character of the new, young empress. He found the effect quite affecting.

He turned to Shoukei's thicker epistle with a heavier heart. And therein he discovered her unadorned expressions of regret. She regretted never having taken her father to task while she was Princess Royal. She had ignorantly failed to live up to her obligations, and her father was dead as the result. Such a lack of filial piety and such needless suffering inflicted upon the people forced the hand

of Gekkei and the others to tread painfully upon the Will of Heaven.

Furthermore, after Gekkei had spared her life, despite her guilt, she had not reflected upon this gift, but instead had been possessed by hatred. Even when she'd been transferred to Kyou, her impudence had made a mockery of Gekkei's forbearance, and for that she was deeply sorry.

"So she finally understood—" Just like the Kei general said, people could change.

Taking another person to task was an often difficult proposition. All the admonishments directed at Chuatatsu came to nothing. In fact, taking every disagreement as evidence of disobedience, in the end they only spurred him on. But Gekkei didn't want to believe that his criticisms had no meaning, for such words of reproof arose out of a hope and a love that couldn't be articulated.

The letter continued. Shoukei wished to make recompense for the crimes she'd committed when she absconded from Kyou, else she could not be worthy of serving in the Imperial Palace of Kei. She would surrender herself to the Royal Kyou and accept whatever punishment she deserved.

She did not know what would become of her after that. There were things she wished to communicate to Gekkei personally. But the situation being what it was, she would entrust her thoughts to this document instead.

And so she concluded the letter, with an additional postscript that she expected to be leaving Gyouten about the same time General Sei delivered this letter to him.

"To Kyou—" the surprised Gekkei muttered aloud. He glanced through the letter several times, then got to his feet and went to the door of the study and called for a servant.

Even as a prank, to pilfer the property of the Imperial Palace was no different than robbing the Royal Kyou herself. It wasn't the same thing as petty larceny. If ruled an assault against the Empress, then it wasn't unheard of for the crime to be classified as high treason. In any case, the mood of the Minister of Fall would come into play.

Knowing all this Shoukei had written, *Hence I am entrusting these thoughts to*

paper.

No matter what penance she had performed, no matter how deeply she had earned the trust of the Royal Kei, spending her last days in a prison cell awaiting execution would render it all a waste.

"Could somebody please come here!" Gekkei called out.

A servant hurried down the hallway. Gekkei was about to tell him to fetch one of the junior ministers when he hesitated. He was only a Province Lord. He didn't have the authority to go ordering Imperial clerks around. He'd denied that authority to himself.

For the first time, Gekkei was seized by the enormity of what he had rejected. Without that authority, he could do nothing for anybody. All the grief in the world wouldn't save a soul. As a marquis, his will extended no farther than the borders of his province. He could save the people of his province. But even there he'd been unable to oppose Imperial policy. The insufferable laws enacted by Chuutatsu applied as equally in Kei as elsewhere. He couldn't repeal or ignore them as he saw fit. He'd danced around them as best he could, but in the end hadn't been able to spare his people from Chuutatsu's wrath.

And beyond the precincts of Kei Province, he hadn't saved a single person.

You're excusing yourself to the wrong person. That was definitely the case. The person reaching out, the person making amends was someone completely different.

Unsettled by the sudden silence, the servant asked, "Did you need something?"

Gekkei glanced at him and nodded. "Call the chief secretary here. I'll be sending a communiqué to the Royal Kyou. We shall need to prepare a draft."

"As you wish!" the servant answered crisply. He bowed low, then turned and rushed off.

Watching the servant depart, Gekkei said to himself, "Whatever happens, Shoukei must be spared."

Gekkei cut through the courtyard to the guest house. He was not surprised to

see that his visitor—who'd begged off earlier that evening on account of fatigue—was examining correspondence by lamplight.

He paused on the veranda and rapped on the window. "Still haven't settled down for the night?"

Sei put down his brush. He looked up and smiled brightly. "It was my intent, but I feel strangely awake." He opened the door as he spoke and urged Gekkei to enter.

Gekkei stepped into the room with great deliberation. He bowed deeply to the general.

"Marquis?"

"I have taken the time to read the correspondence from the Royal Kei."

When Gekkei raised his head, Sei smiled knowingly and corrected his posture as well. "I must apologize for springing all of this upon you so suddenly. I am very pleased to know that you have accepted it in the spirit given."

"And Shoukei-sama's letter as well. If possible, I would like to send her a reply. I hope you would not object to my relying upon your good offices."

"Not at all."

"And if it would not seem too presumptuous of me, to the Royal Kei as well."

"I am sure Her Highness would be pleased to hear back from you."

Gekkei bowed again and got to his feet. He glanced again at Sei. He'd heard that the Empress was quite young. The rumors hadn't much to say beyond that, but the character of her envoy speaks volumes about the kind of person she was. Implicit in what the general had said and the way he said it was his absolute trust in her.

"You're a good man, General Sei. And Royal Kei must be a fine woman."

Sei smiled. "She is, without a doubt."

Gekkei nodded. "By the way, if you're still having trouble getting to sleep, how about a drink? And seeing as you have eaten dinner, I'm sure we could at least

Sei agreed cheerfully. "I'd be happy to."

Gekkei called a servant and ordered food and drink to be brought. "Providing you don't mind the musty blankets, I'd like you to move into the Guest Palace. Everything's been in storage these past four years, so I can't guarantee much in the way of luxury."

"Not a problem. I appreciate the gesture."

"We haven't much in the way of visitors from other kingdoms of late. If this one time only, I'd like to welcome you and your retinue as official guests, and introduce you to the Chousai and the rest of the Rikkan. I think meeting the emissaries from Kei would do a lot to encourage our civil service."

Losing its king had isolated the Imperial Court of Hou as well. Recognition from Kei would greatly set the ministers' minds at ease.

"But—"

"Besides, I think I should be moving residences. To the north wing of the Imperial Palace."

A smile creased Sei's lips. He nodded and said, "In that case, I'll gladly take you up on your offer."

Chapter 9

The communiqué was delivered by air to Kyou, accompanied by an ambassador *pro tem*. The ambassador returned three days later. He entered the Naiden, shoulders slumped, in an obviously dejected mood.

The shuttered Naiden had been reopened, and Gekkei had relocated there with a small number of his personal effects. He'd apologized for his bouts of indecision, and stated that the position of Kei Province Lord needed filling. The ministers enthusiastically set to the task. Two days later, Gekkei was formally installed as provisional head of state.

"How did it go?" he asked the ambassador, pushing aside the document he was working on and getting to his feet.

The ambassador bowed low. "Well—ah—the Royal Kyou made it clear that no leniency would be shown. She granted me a personal audience, but was clearly upset."

"I'm not surprised."

"Even the Royal Kei's petition asking for leniency on behalf of the Princess Royal—"

The Royal Kyou, he explained, had not disguised the fact that she considered the Royal Kei and Gekkei to be meddling in the internal affairs of her kingdom.

"She said that only the Kyou Ministry of Fall was authorized to judge criminals in Kyou. It was not within the purview of the Royal Kyou, let alone representatives from other kingdoms, to bend the law to their benefit."

"I see," Gekkei said with a dejected sigh. He knew asking for a reduction of sentence had been presumptuous. Neither was the Royal Kyou's anger a surprise. But he hadn't been able to deny his gut reaction to try and help Shoukei.

Perhaps doing the right thing by Chuutatsu's daughter was Gekkei's way of repaying the Royal Hou for his disloyalty. Or perhaps it was because Gekkei could sympathize with another person also wracked by her own personal demons. There was no way to wipe the slate clean now, but he wanted to believe that through self-awareness and repentance a person could earn absolution.

As if grasping the weight of Gekkei's disappointment, the ambassador bowed his head lower. "I'm afraid she lectured me quite severely. With the future of both Kei and Hou hanging in the balance, she said there was no call whatsoever for so many hands to be wrung over the fate of a mere girl, and a petty criminal at that."

"Yes, well, I'm sorry about that."

The ambassador nodded and continued, his head still lowered. "As punishment, the Princess Royal was ordered banished. Should she ever be observed within the borders of the Kingdom of Kyou again, no mercy would be shown."

Startled, Gekkei's urged the ambassador to continue. "And then what?"

"The word was that she was expeditiously deported." He pressed his lips together in consternation.

A slight smile came to Gekkei's face. "So that was the word."

"I apologize for not having made myself more useful in this regard." The ambassador head slumped even further.

"Not at all," Gekkei said with heartfelt appreciation. "It was the Royal Kyou's way of telling Shoukei that such apologies were beneath her."

"But—"

"And her way of telling Shoukei not to let the door hit her on the way out."

Because the Royal Kyou wouldn't countenance meddling in their internal affairs, apologies weren't going to cut it either way. Refusing to muster any sympathy in response to the petitions sent by the Royal Kei and Gekkei—forever reserving the right to sanction crimes committed under her watch—may have been a reflection of her pride as Empress. But it may also been her way of

rebuking them for diverting the resources of their kingdoms from more pressing matters in order to address what she saw as trivialities.

Probably the latter.

He was already a regicide. It wasn't as if she needed to take Gekkei to task personally. Rather, she was telling him to get over himself, to seize the reins of power, rush into the breach, and stop his kingdom's downward spiral.

"Let's find a diplomatic back channel through which we can express our thanks to the Royal Kyou—"

Gekkei again commended the ambassador. Then he dismissed him and returned to his desk and the letter he'd been working on. Rereading what he'd already written, he had to smile. He was simply raking himself over the coals, confessing to his treasonous crimes all over again.

Shaking his head, he tore up the letter. "Even now I feel a compunction to apologize to His Highness—"

The only reason he wanted to Shoukei to understand his actions was because he wanted Chuutatsu to. Because by repaying Shoukei he could somehow atone for his own sins. Because Shoukei empathizing with his actions would somehow equate with Chuutatsu condoning what he'd done.

But what good would words directed at her father through her do for Shoukei? If any apologies were due anybody, Shoukei was the only person who could benefit.

Gekkei sighed to himself and stared out the window. His rooms in the Naiden clung to the steep slopes of the mountain. The window faced the administrative annex of Youshun Palace. He could see as well the waves of the Sea of Clouds pounding against the shore. The dark, muddy appearance of the water's surface was due to the thick clouds blanketing the world below. It was spring, and the rains were unusually fierce for this time of year.

Indeed, the Princess Royal had long ago left these shores. No one in Hou need spare a thought for what would become of her henceforth. They had to keep this ship of state afloat, keep it from being dashed to pieces upon the rocks. When a kingdom lost its king, every leak below the waterline was evidence of a dozen

more yet to be discovered.

Hou would continue to founder. The kingdom had already begun to list. In better times, the people of Hou survived working in the forests and on their farms. But the rains were heavy this year. The sun scarcely shone and the forage barely grew in the fields. The cattle wouldn't fatten without fodder and the people would be left with nothing. The droughts of summer and the snows of winter were the inevitable consequence of violating the Mandate of Heaven.

Gekkei had killed the king. But the rain fell on the just and unjust alike, and the people would taste those bitter fruits as well. He had the responsibility to return their king to them, someone with the determination to provide a firm rudder, a leader with the strength of will to protect them.

"Someone who could learn from Shoukei's example."

She had found the courage to account for her sins and stand before the Royal Kyou. If nothing else, she was no coward. And like her, he should carry his own yoke and make himself ready to stand tall before Hou's new king.

There was only one apology that he truly owed Shoukei: *Forgive me for taking your father from you.*

Tomorrow morning, General Sei would set out for the Eastern Kingdom of Kei. *Tell her I wish her well*, were Gekkei's final words to him. *At some point in the future I should like to see her again.*

Until then, these would be the last thoughts he would spare her. The Princess Royal would soon become another forgotten memory. There were so many people besides herself that needed to be saved.

Pen-pals

The Imperial Palace floated on the Sea of Clouds, perched along the edge of the overhanging cliffs as if to take the entirety of the world below into its field of view.

This was Gyouten Mountain, the capital of the Kingdom of Kei. At the ninth station of the mountain that held up Kinpa Palace, a small skylight was tunneled into the white mountain wall. The skylight opened. A bird flew out, turned to the northwest, and sailed away.

The bird's vivid plumage resembled that of a phoenix. It soared over the territory of Kei, straight as an arrow towards the soaring, mountainous border. Three days later it arrived at the capital of En and Kankyuu Mountain.

The broad avenues spread out from the base of the mountain. Crossing the sky above, the bird skimmed across the tiled roofs of the buildings hugging the mountain. These roofs were elevated only slightly above the rest of the city. It headed for the one furthest in, burrowed into the flank of the mountain, and alighted on the window sill.

The window looked out from a room chiseled into the rock. Kankyuu Mountain was part of the Imperial Palace and the Imperial government. The room was quite modest and simple. Though the tool marks on the stone walls and floor revealed the work of skilled artisans, the space was graced only by worn and weathered table and chair.

The setting sun illuminated the curtains drawn across the stone-carved bookcase and bed, as if shining through clouded amber.

The bird tapped on the glass with its beak. At the sound, the person sitting at the desk in the room raised his head. Or rather, the gray-haired tail falling off the edge of the chair was not that of a human, but a rat. He glanced over his shoulder at the window. Spotting the bird, he fluttered his silver whiskers.

"Come in," he called out.

The bird flew through the open sash to the book-strewn desk and lit on the edge. He patted his head. The bird cocked its head to the side and began to speak in a woman's clear voice.

"Hey, it's been a while. How's it going?"

He laughed and nodded as if she was there in person. Her voice and diction was that of anybody but an Empress.

Chapter 2

The bird continued in Youko's voice, "I'm doing okay. The best I can, I suppose. I can't help feeling a little self-conscious sitting here talking to a bird. It's like talking to myself. Though I guess I'm the only one here who feels that way. Well, um—" She paused for a moment before continuing.

I'm getting used to life in Kinpa Palace. I've managed to make it from the Seishin to the Gaiden without asking for directions. I'm getting used to the lay of the land, like it's someplace I belong. I took your advice, and my explorations seem to have turned out okay. It turned into a big, two-day expedition. Keiki drew me a map, but I still got myself plenty lost.

The Imperial Palace is so big that two days is hardly enough time to take in the whole thing. There are thirty-two buildings in the Seishin alone! On top of that, there are these little bridges all over the place, and if you go across them, there's this *other* place called the Koukyuu on the other side—it just makes me laugh! I haven't explored the Koukyuu yet. Make that the Koukyuu and the East Palace. And the administrative offices. I mean, taking a look at the places I'm personally connected to took a whole two days! What am I supposed do with all these buildings?

Just them sitting there doing nothing seems like an awful waste. I've been thinking of maybe renting out rooms to earn a little extra income for the Imperial treasury. Or maybe using them for refugee housing. Or creating an Imperial hospital. Keiki turns all my ideas down flat. He says such things are absolutely not allowed. If we tore them all down, at least that'd get rid of the maintenance costs. But apparently that's a non-starter as well.

Kei is plenty poor, and it seem to me that I shouldn't be living in a place like this. But Keiki goes on about Imperial dignity and etcetera. I've got tons of clothing and jewelry that I inherited from all the rulers before me.

Selling it all would make a sizable addition to the treasury. Frankly, when people start going on about the "dignity of the kingdom" and the "dignity of the crown," I don't really get what they're talking about.

Just the other day, I thanked the maids for cleaning my room. Keiki gave me a hard time about it. He says they won't respect me if I'm casual with them like that, but I'm not convinced. Oh, yeah, and no making notes. Most of the stuff that goes on around here I've never seen or heard about before. There's no way I'm going to remember any of it if I can't write it down. So I was carrying a notebook around with me so I could, you know, take notes. Keiki got on my case about that too! He says it makes the ministers uneasy. I'm supposed to be above it all or whatever. So whenever I find out something new, I sneak away someplace and write it down in secret. Though that isn't exactly genius behavior either.

I'm telling you, Keiki nags me from morning till night. You wouldn't think he could be so annoying, supposedly being chock full of humanity and charity and all. The only kirin I've met so far are Enki and Keiki, so I've really got to wonder sometimes. The end result is, we get into these big arguments. It must really freak out the ministers.

Though come to think about it, when they treat me with kid gloves, I tend to get overconfident. So Keiki's probably just what I need. With everybody bowing down to me wherever I go, it's easy to think I have everything under control. Him being such a taskmaster keeps me from getting a swollen head. All things considered, I think I'm handling things okay. Though it'd be a lot better if he wasn't so freaking *uptight* every minute of the day.

I seem to get along with everybody *besides* Keiki. But that's probably just because I'm so clueless. Whatever the Rikkan says, my reaction is, well, why not? Once I figure out more about what's going on, we'll probably end up having more disagreements.

The court ladies who help me out are very good at what they do. And they're fun to gossip with. Keiki gives me his sour look and says I shouldn't get too attached to the help. But there's no way I can be high-

handed with the people I spend every morning and evening with.

One of my ladies-in-waiting is named Gyokuyou. She's nice. I really like her. She used to be in the Ministry of Spring. She did something in education. The name of the department completely escapes me right now. Man, I feel like such a pea-brain sometimes. Anyway, I think she worked for the people who build schools. We talk about what schools are like here compared to Yamato. I should get her transferred back to the Ministry of Spring. She didn't lose her position because she did anything wrong. It was because the Late Empress Yo had all the women exiled from Kei. After leaving Kei, she traveled all over the place, and took the opportunity to visit schools wherever she went. She's got a really positive outlook on life.

Speaking of which, I met a girl named Gyokuyou before in Kou. I guess it's a pretty popular name. But as I was saying, the Gyokuyou who's my lady-in-waiting knows all these great stories about the other kingdoms. Hearing them makes me want to travel too. Not just around Kei, but the other kingdoms as well. And not just running from one tourist trap to another, but taking the time to look and listen.

Unfortunately, these days, seeing how things are going in Kou is about the best I could hope for.

You've probably heard this as well, but it looks like Kourin finally died. The word is, yesterday a new Kouka appeared on Mt. Hou. The Royal Kou is near death's door as well. Things are going to get bad in Kou after this. I know you must be worried, Rakushun. I'll do whatever I can to help. Though you know as well as I that's not a whole lot.

At any rate, from what I've been able to see so far of Kou, things haven't turned awful yet.

I kept hearing that things were getting chancier by the day in Kou, so I managed to talk Keiki into letting me take a look. We don't really have that kind of time to spare, so it was only two days. But I've been worrying about it a lot. For one reason or another, I felt I just couldn't move on with my life until I'd made a return visit. And on the way I could check out

things in Kei as well.

As far as I could tell, things hadn't changed much since the last time. People on the street looked like they had a lot on their minds. Otherwise, they didn't seem any different. It was harvest time, and the fields were very pretty. The farms we passed in Kei along the way were in sadder condition. The faster Kei gets at least as nice as Kou the better.

We visited your mom. She's doing well. We dropped in clear out of the blue, but she gave us a warm welcome anyway. Her steamed bread is as delicious as ever. She didn't seem to have any idea what had happened to me since, so I guess you haven't told her. Getting letters delivered from Kankyuu must be well-nigh impossible. I sensed it was the first time in a long time that somebody she knew had visited her.

So me being Empress never came up. We talked about when I traveled to En with you and what you were up to there. Your mom's hasn't changed a bit. There aren't any natural disasters where she lives, or any youma showing up. They had a better wheat crop this year than last, so her wages went up. While she's aware that Kourin died, she just smiled and said she wasn't sure what it had to do with a little old lady like her.

Of course, she's worried more about you—if you're eating well, if you're living okay, how college is going. In any case, it's nice to hang out with somebody who isn't bowing to you all the time. I really like her. Did I mentioned how good her bread was?

We took a quick look around Shin County, and visited the village where I was first swept ashore—from afar, that is. I have to say, it a kind of took me back, and that surprised me. It was a strange feeling, and not necessarily a bad feeling. It brought back memories, all that self-loathing I used to have. But I'm glad I went. I can live with what I've made of myself, and that's encouraging.

After our tour of Kou and traveling back to Kei, I told myself I really had to get down to business. It's harvest time and still so many farms are a total mess. I have to do something about that.

It's easy to tell people to keep a positive attitude and put their shoulder

to the wheel. I have a ton of things to learn before I earn the right to go around saying things like that. To be honest, there are times when I'm completely out to sea. I guess this long lifespan of mine will be useful for something. Otherwise, about the time I figured out how to run this place, I'd be an old granny with one foot in the grave.

It'd be nice if there was some sort of news service for the kingdoms so we could get reports on how things are going. The best thing I can do is the Imperial let's-all-get-along ceremony I conducted the other day. It's supposed to keep the youma from getting out of hand, but I'm not sure I see the connection.

What I could see on the trip to and from Kou wasn't enough to get a good grasp of the situation. And inside the Imperial Palace, I don't hear anything about how the real people are doing. I like to be able to take a relaxed stroll through a normal town. Being empress doesn't give you a whole lot of freedom. Though I probably feel that way because the only other ruler I know is the Royal En. I have to wonder how the other kings and empresses keep tabs on their subjects. If we can't walk around like normal people, then we ought to at least devise some sort of reporting system so we can stay up to date about what's going on.

Well, back to the grindstone. I still can't remember the names of the government departments and their portfolios and the names and faces of the important ministers and secretaries to my own satisfaction. Hearing myself say that, I have to wonder if I'm up for the job. Keiki tells me that these things are inevitable, that there's no need to rush. Now and then even he shows me a little sympathy, gives me a little encouragement. Only now and then.

Oh, yeah. We're finally getting around to formally conducting the coronation ceremony. It's set for next month. Remembering all the rules and protocols is a real pain. I hope you'll be able to come. I know you have your studies, so I don't want to inconvenience you. Keiki has made arrangements in any case. If you think it's just going to be a waste of time, don't feel bad about blowing the whole thing off. I won't take it personally.

Um, with the coronation, there will be an official change of era. The era name was left up to me. I've been thinking about using a character from your name. If I hadn't met you, I would have died in those mountains. Granted, it's a pretty personal name, but I consider you a real prince of Kei, so I was hoping it'd be okay. It's fine with Keiki. We agreed that the era name should be "Sekiraku."

"Ah," Youko said, as if imagining the expression on his face. "All I'm doing is taking about myself. What are you up to, Rakushun?"

In fact, I was just in a conference with Rokuta-kun discussing what to do about the Kei refugees still in En. Rokuta says that you ranked number one on your entrance exams. Or maybe you haven't gotten the results yourself yet? Either way, congratulations. I'm really happy for you. Now, don't get all full of yourself.

So what are universities in En like? I bet you're learning tons of amazing stuff. Rokuta was making noises about recruiting you for the civil service there. If En starts making you offers, we'd like to too. But I guess you'd probably like to go back to Kou. Whatever happens, let's keep our chins up.

Next time, I'll try to come up with some more noteworthy news. Patching a kingdom back together is a whole lot harder than you'd imagine.

What's that? Oh, Keiki just told me he says hello. He's no doubt got a pile of work for me to do. Man, sometimes I feel like throwing in the towel on all these weird words. We should come up with some *real* words that *normal* people can understand.

And I'm having Keiki carry my notebooks. He walks around all day, a notebook hanging from a strap around his neck, taking notes for me. I think he looks so charming when he does that. Oops, now he's giving me the evil eye. Time to hit the books.

See you.

Chapter 3

The bird abruptly stopped speaking, tilted its head to the side and looked at Rakushun.

Rakushun said himself, "You seem to be doing well, Youko."

The blue bird curiously cocked its head in the opposite direction.

"You're getting the hang of being an Empress."

The bird warbled as if in reply. Rakushun laughed and got a jar from off the bookcase. He took out a grain of silver and gave it to the bird.

The bird only ate silver. Rakushun didn't know its name. The birds were used to pass messages back and forth among the aristocracy. They usually didn't go anywhere near anybody of Rakushun's class. A blue twill-like pattern ran through its wings. The long, dark-blue tail feathers were spotted with white. The beak and legs were red.

The bird pecked at the grain of silver with its red beak, and sang again.

A knock came at the door. Startled, the bird flew off the desk and out the window.

Before Rakushun could respond, the door opened. These rooms carved into the flank of Kankyuu Mountain were college dorms. The university offices were located there as well. Most of the student body shared quarters with the teachers and staff.

Meiken—another student at the university—poked his head in the door. "Hey *Bun Chou*, you got a delivery." He came into the room carrying a book.

"I told you, this 'Captain' business—"

"Don't sweat it," said Meiken, placing the book on the desk. "Pillow Spider asked me to take this to the Captain."

The gray rat's whisker's drooped a bit and he sighed. Observing his expression, Meiken grinned. "Captain of Composition," Rakushun's nickname meant. A professor had used those words to praise him because of an essay he'd written. The word got around campus, and before long the name stuck.

"Just take it in the spirit of respect intended. Though I wouldn't deny a touch of teasing or prejudice can be found there sometimes."

"I can't say that I took any offense."

"So what's the problem? It's a lot better than 'Pillow Spider.'" Meiken laughed.

Pillow Spider's *azana* was *Shintatsu*. But not even the professors called him that. He was so zealous a student that he purportedly never stopped to sleep or eat. One day a friend visiting his room saw that a spider had woven a web attached to his pillow. That anecdote became the basis for his new nickname. That was generally the way names circulated across campus.

Meiken's name ("crowing intelligently") was not written the same way it was pronounced. He was admitted to college at the age of nineteen, a remarkable feat. The name had accompanied him ever since. Something to do with him being a clever kid with a big head. Meiken probably didn't really know himself.

"So, when does he want this back?"

"Oh, he said you could keep it." Meikaku retrieved a stood from the corner of the room and sat down.

Rakushun shot him a surprised look. "I just asked to borrow it."

"Yeah, well, Spidey says he doesn't need it anymore."

"Doesn't need it?"

"He's throwing in the towel. Couldn't collect enough signatures to graduate." Meiken added under his breath, "After eight years."

Students didn't graduate after a fixed number of years, but only after the professors in their chosen field of study literally signed off on their graduation. Until a student had filled his card, he couldn't graduate. It was not uncommon for students to exhaust their financial aid before that happened.

"Spidey's got a wife and a kid."

"That's right."

Rakushun gave the textbook Spidey had given him a troubled look. Only three hundred students or so from across the kingdom won the privilege of attending the Imperial University. Many students retook the entrance exams over and over well into their thirties and forties. A fair number of them had a family by the time they were admitted, and relied on their spouses to make ends meet. Spidey undoubtedly already heard middle age calling to him.

As there was no set age for matriculation or graduation, students could be anywhere from their twenties to their forties.

Meiken was twenty-six. He'd matriculated at an unusually young age. But despite his moniker, his progress ground surprisingly to a halt after three years. He stopped attending lectures. In a display of his outstanding talent (or so it was said), he'd collected six signatures his first year alone. But his second came and went, and then his third, and the numbers dwindled. He'd only added one the year before last, and then none at all the year after that. Go three years without passing a course and he'd be expelled.

Like Spidey, many students quit before that third year rolled around. To the outside world, it looked better on one's resume. A student could always claim he'd run short of funds and he had to think about his family, that he couldn't keep putting his wife and kids through such travails. With his transcripts to date, he could find work and even return to school in the future.

"Then I guess it's time to take things seriously," Rakushun said.

Meiken frowned and turned his gaze out the window. "Yeah, I guess."

Meiken's first thought as well had been to go full bore and make something happen. But the demands of academia were such that he couldn't naively believe that abandoning the simple pleasures of sleeping and eating and recklessly diving into his studies would accomplish the goal.

It must seem a logical course of action. After all, a student graduating from the Imperial University was guaranteed a job in an Imperial ministry. But in another year, he thought, *this rat will discover just how steep that climb would become*.

He turned the stool around and said to Rakushun, "Hey, is it true you never

attended secondary school?"

"It is. *Hanjuu* aren't allowed past elementary school in Kou."

"Yeah, I've heard that Kou is pretty tough on hanjuu like that."

In En, no such restrictions were placed on hanjuu. Any hanjuu like Rakushun could take the entrance exams, and if he passed, could go on to serve in a government position. This was not true in many kingdoms.

"And in Kou, hanjuu don't have a *koseki* either?"

"Well, hanjuu do have a *koseki*, but all that's recorded is your hanjuu status. And when you turn twenty, you don't legally become an adult."

"Then even though you've got a *koseki*, you don't receive an allotment?"

Rakushun shook his head. "Or a stipend. And you can't legally work."

"You can't work? You gotta be kidding."

"I'm not kidding," Rakushun answered with a shrug and a smile.

Meiken's surprised was not feigned. In En, even refugees and displaced persons without a *koseki* record could find employment. It tended to be at the lowest wages, often not much better than that of indentured servants, but they weren't barred from working.

"Anybody hiring a hanjuu would be taxed an amount equivalent to the wages paid. So nobody in his right mind would hire a hanjuu."

"How do hanjuu in Kou get by then?"

"They pretty much have to depend on their parents."

"And when their parents die?"

"They are sent to orphanages, though as servants."

"Unbelievable. I never imagined there were kingdoms that did stuff like that."

Meiken recalled rumors he'd heard about how chancy a place Kou had become, and that the Kou kirin had died. Well, there was no way such a regime could have survived for long.

"But you at least attended a district academy?"

"Normally it's not allowed, but I was given permission to sit in corner of the room and audit classes."

"And after that? Did you attend *juku*?"

"We couldn't afford something like that. Unlike En, Kou doesn't provide any financial aid for education."

"Not even to a prefectural college?"

"Nope," said the rat.

"So how does anybody learn anything?"

Meiken was truly startled by this information. A student normally advanced to university after graduating from a prefectural college. A letter of recommendation from the headmaster or some other well-regarded dignitary was required. Getting into a prefectural college similarly required a recommendation from a district academy, which meant getting outstanding grades and really standing out in the crowd. From the time a student started attending the district academy, attending a *juku* was a necessity. Either that or, as in Meiken case, hiring a private tutor.

"I did take on a teacher for about a month before the exams."

"There's no way that would cut it."

The place to prepare for university was not at a public school. Having the skills to a district academy the goal did not equate to having what it took to get into a provincial college. It was up to the student himself to make up the difference through his own effort. In En, at least, the student who set himself apart could get his *juku* fees covered, and there were publically-funded prep schools as well. Unless he could avail himself of these options, a student who didn't have wealthy parents couldn't attend *juku*.

"There are books, you see."

"Books—"

Books were expensive. A student who couldn't afford to attend a *juku* was unlikely to be able to afford books.

"My father left a lot of books to me. And no matter how trying things got, my

mom made every effort never to part with one. So when I get my hands on a book, I read it over and over, make notes, and cram its contents into my head. That way, even if I had to sell it, it wouldn't matter."

Rakushun grinned. "Yeah, my father was like a teacher. He died when I was a little kid, but left a lot of manuscripts behind."

He indicated the top of his desk. Meiken got to his feet and took a closer look at the pile of worn books. Their rough appearance gave him the impression of a number of documents being compiled and amateurishly bound together. However, the handwriting was exquisite. The text was about diplomatic protocols. It seemed a random collection of thoughts. Still, not only the characters, but the sentences as well were expertly crafted.

"I see. You've been using this as a model. That's why your writing is so good."

"Not compared to my dad," Rakushun said with a smile. "This has been a real resource for me. My father's writings are the one thing I would never part with."

There were five volumes on the bookshelf next to him with the same paper and cover as the one on his desk. Since each book was large enough to enclose seven or eight volumes, the books represented a library of forty or so volumes.

Meiken quickly corrected himself. Together with the book on the desk, it was more like fifty. A quick perusal told him that the text was written at a fairly advanced level. "This is really something. Was your father a professor or something?"

"No. Though apparently when he was young, he worked for the county government in one capacity or another."

"Huh."

"I had these, and some books, and nothing else to do except study. At best, I could work my allotment and grow rice. But there'd be no house or land in the offing. Anyway, my mom sold everything to pay for my education."

"No kidding." Meiken said to the smiling, rather nonchalant rat, "Must be tough being a hanjuu."

"It can be just as tough not being one," Rakushun answered lightly.

"Yeah, I suppose," Meiken laughed as well, though his internal reaction was far more mixed. In private, the good humor in calling him "Captain" was often less than good. *For a hanjuu*— said the cold smiles accompanying it.

The reason Rakushun had to borrow the book in the first place was because the library was loath to lend him the texts required for classes. He alone had to sign an affidavit to the effect that he would return book borrowed from the library on time and undamaged. Some students said it was because they were afraid he would nibble on them. Or that they were afraid he'd sell them.

Meiken himself couldn't say. As for the former, it was stupid bigotry based on outward appearances. As for the latter, it was the kind of prejudice attached to anybody dumped in the same basket as refugees from other kingdoms.

It was good of Pillow Spider to give Rakushun the book. At the same time, though, Meiken couldn't avoid noticing that the only people who ever seemed to hang around with Rakushun were dropouts like himself and Spidey. Those steadily filling their cards wouldn't invite Rakushun into their cliques. Professors weren't necessarily an exception either. One in particular had made it clear that Rakushun was welcome in his class only in human form.

Except that this hanjuu student was a genius. Especially when it came to the law, the rumor around campus was that he amazed even his professors.

But for Meiken, that was only additional cause for concern. The geniuses who burned the brightest at the start often burned out the quickest. Like himself. So focused on passing the entrance exams, their field of vision was similarly narrow. Even though they'd made it over that first big hurdle, the shallow reach of their knowledge became stumbling blocks. Deprived of the impetus that had kept them going for so long, they lost sight of their real goals. The naysayers kept all those precedents in mind and waited for Rakushun's fall.

"I bet coming to En was a bit of a let-down," Meiken said.

"A let-down?" Rakushun echoed, clearly taken aback.

"I mean, things here being no so different than they are in Kou, and all."

"Not so different? There was no way I could attend college in Kou."

"Well, there is that."

Rakushun smiled, his furry cheeks dimpling. "Kou and En are nothing alike. Night and day."

"Really?"

"Really."

And he really meant it, Meiken surmised. Rakushun wasn't one to prevaricate. His tail and whiskers gave him away every time.

"Graduating from a place like this in one piece takes a lot of work. You've got a rough road ahead"

"Now you're being depressing."

"Nobody's ever graduated who matriculated at the top of his class."

"That's just an old myth. Professor Hou said so himself."

I wish it was. Meiken let out a big sigh instead. He said, gesturing, "Hey, so this is all about you basking in your freedom since leaving Kou and coming to En?"

"This is—?"

"You're always in that form."

"Ah—" said Rakushun, looking down at his gray, furry body. "This isn't because I came to En. I've always gone around like this."

"Even in a kingdom that discriminates against hanjuu?"

"Yeah, but it doesn't make any difference what you look like. What you are is recorded on your koseki. And besides, we were poor. I don't need to worry about clothes when I'm like this."

"Of course." Meiken said, a touch of irony in his voice, "But when you think about it, it's still got to cause a lot of problems. You not being used to your human form is why you're so lousy at archery."

Archery was considered an aspect of ritual and deportment, a required subject. The emphasis was on learning conduct and decorum and less on hitting the target. Nevertheless, skills required to actually hit a target were necessary, and the archer had to be able to go through all the motions before firing an arrow.

"You do have a point."

"Same thing with riding a horse. If you don't master your human form sufficiently to shoot and arrow and ride a horse properly, you'll never fill your card."

"I can't argue with you about that." Rakushun's whiskers drooped dejectedly.
"I must confess that I've been thinking the same thing."

Watching Rakushun practicing horseback riding and archery was like watching a randomly bouncing ball. It seemed to Meiken that he simply didn't have a good command of his own body. Looking down at the stool he was sitting on, it struck him that Rakushun was so short he'd need it even to open the window. The differences between his human and rat forms were significant enough that he couldn't exactly sell the former as his "true form."

"The more you do it, the better you'll get. You're never going to graduate if you can't get a handle on it."

"Yeah."

"Well, chin up, and prove the folklore wrong."

Meiken grinned, and so did Rakushun. "You too, Meiken. The legends have it that nobody has ever graduated who matriculated before the age of twenty."

Meiken clucked to himself as he got to his feet. "More folklore. And that one's going down, if I have anything to say about it." He headed to the door in high spirits, then stopped and looked back over his shoulders. "Tonight, after dinner," he said, pointing his finger at Rakushun.

"After dinner?" queried Rakushun. "What?"

"Don't give me that. Archery practice, right?" Meiken laughed as he left.

Rakushun went to stop him, but decided against it. He scratched his head and said to himself, "Not really the time for him to be worrying about other people."

He heard a chirp behind him. Turning, his eyes met the gaze of the blue bird perched on the windowsill.

"Yeah, I guess we kind of startled you."

The bird again flew over to the desk and cocked its head to one side. Rakushun got another grain of silver from the jar and presented it to the bird. Watching it peck at the expensive feed, he said in earnest, "I'm a lucky fellow, thanks to Youko."

There was no denying that Kou was a tough kingdom for a hanjuu. When Rakushun came to En from Kou, he felt like a refugee leaving a devastated country behind, like he'd escaped by the skin of his teeth. He'd heard that a hanjuu could attend school in En, could find employment, could even become government officials. Get a koseki like any regular person, and a hanjuu could receive an allotment and stipend. He'd be treated like anybody else. He had longed for En as if for a lover.

"Well, it didn't exactly turn out to be heaven, either."

When he saw the place with his own two eyes, he saw that there was good, bad, and everything in-between.

"But there are good blokes like Meiken. Just getting into college has proved a real windfall for me. My only real problem is keeping at it and graduating."

Rakushun rested his chin on the desktop and muttered, "Along with paying tuition."

He saved some money anticipating the time when he might make it to En. But it wasn't nearly enough to last him all the way to graduation.

"I've opted out of everything I could this year. But once this economizing starts to hurt my grades, that's where I draw the line."

Would he graduate? Could he keep on living in En until that day came? And if he did graduate, then what?

In any case, compared to his life in Kou, living here was like night and day. Though his mother had given away her last farthing to get him an education, Nothing existed for Rakushun beyond that. As long as he remained in Kou, every avenue was blocked. He hadn't needed to give any thought about what the next year would bring, let alone his "future." That was the one thing he hadn't needed to worry about.

"Yeah, En and Kou really are two different worlds." He stroked the throat of

the blue bird. "You really are something."

The bird again opened its beak and that dearly familiar voice again filled the room. The girl who had become Empress of Kei. Even receiving her letters by this means, she lived a world apart from his own. Youko was listed upon the Registry of Gods, and would never age beyond the age she had been when they last parted. As a citizen of the world below, Rakushun would only grow further and further apart.

Youko had only recently acceded to the throne. She knew nobody in the Imperial Court and could trust only Keiki. The last thing she needed to be worrying about was Rakushun. She had enough troubles of her own. The future of Kei and all its millions of people rested on her shoulders.

"All I did was pick up something lying at the side of the road."

Lying there as good as dead. Hardly something he would ever consider worshipping. No normal person could have just walked by on the other side. Taking her home and nursing her back to health was something anybody could have done.

What he had received in compensation far exceeded what he had done.

Even if he hadn't met Youko, he would have made his way to En somehow. But wasn't so naive as to believe that a person with no connections could carve out much of a future for himself. Thanks to Youko, he'd gotten those lucky breaks. He could never tell a soul, but that lucky break has come from the Royal En himself.

The King had smoothed the way, making it possible for Rakushun to take the university entrance exams without first graduating from a provincial college. He'd found him a place to stay in the meantime, given him free access to any book he wished to read, and a tutor to help him prepare for the exams. That's what had made his present existence possible.

But from this point forward, he would shape his future according to his own efforts. He'd been given what he needed to make it possible. Thinking back to a time when he had utterly lacked the means to do so, he could only conclude he had been blessed beyond measure.

Ruminating over this, listening to Youko's voice, he said aloud, "And in particular—" and gave the blue bird another grain of silver.

This silver was also a gift from the Royal En. It was the one thing he had specifically asked for that he never could have otherwise managed. There was no way someone like him was even going to lay his hands on an old silver spoon.

The bird happily devoured it and trilled. Rakushun reached out and placed the bird atop his head. When the bird was perched thusly, it would remember everything that the person said. Rakushun didn't know whether it had been trained that way, or behaved according to instinct.

"Hey, Youko. You sound like you're in a good mood."

Her crimson hair and emerald eyes—those were the only fashion accessories Youko had ever needed. Surely by now, she would be clothed in the finest silk and adorned with expensive jewels. But that wasn't the Youko that Rakushun pictured in his mind's eye.

"I'm doing okay myself—"

Chapter 4

The bird crossed the kingdom in three days. A grain of silver was all it needed to fly that far. Their words flew back and forth between Kankyuu and Gyouten literally on the wing. Due to the distance between the two capitals, a letter delivered by surface mail would take a good two months.

The bird flew through the skylight high up on Gyouten Mountain and was promptly snagged by a bureaucrat, who caged it and bore it reverentially to Kinpa Palace on the shores of the Sea of Clouds. The bird couldn't fly above the Sea of Clouds under its own power. It set down at the highest point it could manage.

The cage was passed from an official of the Outer Palace to one of the Inner Palace. After another transfer, it arrived at heart of the Imperial living quarters in the Seishin and was delivered to the Empress's paper-strewn desk just prior to her retiring.

Youko perched the bird on the bookcase next to her desk and stroked its wings. The bird opened his beak and spoke—the words of her first true friend in this world, *his* voice.

I'm doing pretty well myself. I've more or less gotten used to university life. The dorms are pretty comfortable. The homework is tough but I'm managing. Nothing too out of the ordinary, which isn't to say that I haven't stumbled over a few oddities. The food here in En is good too.

So you met my mom, eh? I'm sorry she didn't show you a little more respect. I did tell her. Well, that's the kind of a woman she is, not one to bite her tongue. So give her a break, please. Though I don't think you would take it personally.

But surely she would have minded her manners if the Kei Taiho was with you? Don't tell me you were just wandering around there on your

own. Good grief, at least take a bodyguard with you next time.

I do understand you wanting to go back to Kou to see what was what. I'm glad you were able to get it done. I'm curious as well about how Kou is doing and would like to catch up on conditions there. My mom's a tough lady. I wouldn't normally have any concerns about her getting by on her own. But I do worry about natural disasters and youma and the like. Knowing that nothing's out of the ordinary so far puts my mind at ease. I'm really glad you went to visit her.

Yeah, I heard from the En Taiho that the Kou Taiho had died. He drops by the university now and then. So does the Royal En. When do those guys ever work? You always hear about how competent and efficient the En ministers are. I think that's because they don't *do* anything.

I'm telling you, when they drop by, it's like being visited by a couple of cat burglars. It'll be the middle of the night and I'll hear tapping on the window and go to take a look and there's somebody floating there in the air. Practically gives me a heart attack every time.

The subject of my grades, though, hasn't come up. I got that recently from another source. I can't resist patting myself a bit on the back. I had a pretty good feeling when I was taking the test. On the other hand, there is this folklore about students who matriculate first in their class never graduating. There are stories like that all over the place. It's kind of ironic to hear them at a university.

I guess the En Taiho would know about these legendary difficulties when it comes to graduating. There's no shortage of exemplary public servants here in En, so knowing you're in the running is a real compliment. Needless to say, *hearing* it certainly beats just knowing it. I'd better keep serious and graduate. The time to give thought to my future is *after* I've put these myths and rumors behind me.

Conditions in Kou are definitely going to get chaotic after this. I'm not sure what use I could make of myself in that regard. There's not likely to be much recruiting of government officials going on in Kou by the time I graduate. I never anticipated that Kou would face a dynasty with an

empty throne. The Royal Kou certainly had his problems, but things will likely turn for the worse without him.

No doubt about it, a kingdom just can't do without a king. Of course, when people say stuff like that, I imagine it's got to weigh heavy on your mind, Youko. You just can't go take a stroll whenever you feel like it. No matter how confident you are in your own abilities, I'm not sure you should be frequenting a place where youma are bound to be popping up. You've got to take care of yourself. Your being in the world really counts for something now.

When I say stuff like that, I probably sound like the Kei Taiho. But he's got a point, you know. You don't have a king where you came from, so it's no wonder you don't understand all the ramifications. The dignity of the kingdom and majesty of the monarch are very important. It's all well and good to resist getting too full of yourself, but to a certain extent, the people won't devote themselves to a king who *isn't* full of himself. And his ministers will be less inclined to follow his orders.

Social status matters, and slighting it often leads to trouble. The king is the top dog, and bears the greatest responsibility when and where he acts as such. The higher the rank, the greater the privileges and the more substantial the duties. A king who doesn't take the position seriously will be seen to be taking his duties just as lightly. The tendency is to see such a king as trying to avoid doing his duty. You've got to know when to put on airs and when not to. All things in their season.

At any rate, not having had a king or social status, I don't suppose you'll suddenly "get it" just being told these things. I think it'll come to you in time. Until then, the Kei Taiho will be there to nag you. You won't go wrong listening to what he has to say. A good king is a happy king. Since coming from Kou to En, I've becoming totally convinced of that. A good king is one who works on behalf of his subjects, or as the Kei Taiho says, does nothing except that which is done for the good of the people. Pay attention when you're around him. It'll pay off in the long term.

The two of you seems to be getting along fairly well. And getting along with the bureaucracy as well. Sure, there will be things you aren't used

to, but ultimately competence will win out. And it sounds like you've got good people around you.

Ah, Gyokuyou is the name of a Goddess on Mount Hou. She's the one in charge of the wizardesses. It has come to mean a beautiful girl. Any talented, attractive girl is called "Gyokuyou." Lose those attributes and you'll lose the name. It's mostly a nickname. My mom's little sister was called Gyokuyou. She died before my mom and dad got together, so I never met her.

When you become a notable Empress, you can count on a lot girls being named Youko. Though when I think about it, that'll be kind of odd.

Yeah, a person's nicknames tend to pile up. People start calling you something, and soon everybody does. Before long it's as good as your real name. Coming up with nicknames doesn't take a lot of ingenuity, so like breeds like. It's a surprising phenomenon. Here at university you'll get tagged with one in no time at all. I ended up with the same nickname as my father. Not a bad thing, but a tad awkward on my part.

Ah, what is it about names? Seriously, you're really going with "Sekiraku"? I dunno. It's all news to me. The era name is proudly proclaimed on the occasion of the opening of the new dynasty, in order to pray for the happiness of the people and the tranquility of the realm, and to solemnly usher in the new era. Not to indulge in personal whims like you're naming a pet. Mind you, I've just sharing my opinions, that's all.

Well, ah, hmm. I forgot what I was going to talk about next. Going to school here is a pretty good deal. Most of the professors are fair and approachable. Most of my dorm mates are good people. The facilities are great, the library is well stocked, many of the professors live here and you can drop in on them whenever. The food's good—but I think I already mentioned that.

The Royal En is always looking out for me. He says I can crash at the Imperial Palace if I want, and has offered to get me a house. Turning him down all the time can get to be a pain after a while.

I mean, I'm grateful and all, but, well, you know. Not the kind of thing I can go showing off in front of the professors and other students. And even taking all that out of the equation, I seem to have been deemed a member of your retinue, like when the store manager throws in something extra for free. I hate to have to say it, but this degree of attention is getting on my nerves. If the opportunity ever comes up, I'd appreciate if you'd tell you-know-who to back off a little.

Though after a bit of thought, I suppose that sounds rather rude. After all, the king lives way above all the rest of them who live above the clouds. I wonder if it's thanks to you that I'm so at ease around people like that. Or maybe I take after my mom.

Well, it's okay either way. That's why I've been able to live such a good life. One of my professors got me a scholarship, and that'll take care of my tuition and dorm fees. At this rate, if things turn for the worse in Kou, I'm thinking I'll go get my mom. Seeing as she's getting by working for other people, she can do the same thing anywhere. One of my professors said that they could hire her as a dorm mother. I'm really indebted to so many good people. My luck really started improving since I met you. Youko. I'll never be able to thank you enough.

The En Taiho told me about your upcoming coronation ceremony. He invited me to tag along, and I'm thinking I just might take him up on the offer. I'm looking forward to seeing you deport yourself as an Empress. Not very many people can count royalty among their acquaintances.

Speaking of which, I'd better keep my nose to the grindstone so I can afford to take the time off from my studies. You too, Youko.

Talk to you later.

Chapter 5

The bird stopped talking. Youko nudged it gently with her finger. The bird rewound and started over from the beginning.

Listening to his voice reminded her how much she missed him. Not much time had passed since they'd made their journey together. Still, so many things had happened in the meantime that it seemed like ages ago.

His soft, gray fur and rhythmically swaying tail—his quivering silver whiskers—she couldn't help giggling to herself. She heard a sound behind her and turned with a start. One of her ladies-in-waiting had at some point entered the room and was setting out tea.

"Gyokuyou—"

Gyokuyou raised her head and smiled. "I announced myself, but your attention must have been elsewhere."

"Sorry."

"Is that Sir Rakushun? He seems in a good mood. Forgive me for listening in."

"No, that's okay," said Youko, feeding the bird a grain of silver. "I didn't notice. Rakushun was telling me how Gyokuyou is a name given to talented and comely women."

Gyokuyou laughed. "If that's what he's telling you, then Sir Rakushun surely must not have ever laid eyes on me. I do look forward to meeting him some day, but I fear he will be disappointed."

"But weren't you ever thought to be talented and comely?"

"Oh, I suppose some might have said such a thing when I was a young lass." A bright smile came to the woman's old, weathered face. "Why don't you take a break?"

"That I will," Youko said. She stood up and went to the divan, flopped down and stretched out. "I've been sitting so long my legs are going to sleep."

"You're working too hard."

"All these political terms go in one ear and out the other."

"Not the kind of material that can be digested in one sitting."

"It took you a while to learn it too?"

Gyokuyou nodded. "It certainly did. Even now, I've probably forgotten as much as I've learned. In short, if you can remember the person, you won't remember the position. Fix the person's face in your mind—their position, who they work under, who works for them, and what they do—and by the by it'll all begin to stick."

"I wonder," Youko sighed. "I'd like to remember who everybody is right away, but they don't really appreciate me hanging around their offices."

She met ministers above a certain rank at Privy Council meetings, so she could remember them. But the opportunity never presented itself for all their subordinates. She could go around visiting the individual departments, but the departments weren't exactly enamored of that idea either.

"Yes, that kind of thing is generally frowned upon."

"So I've been told. 'The precedent does not exist.' But it sounds to my ears like I'm being told not to make a nuisance of myself."

"Really—" was Gyokuyou's answer.

The fact of the matter was that no bureaucrat wanted people peeking over his shoulder. All the dirty linen was better stuffed into ministerial closets and left there. Kei was still a kingdom in upheaval. The reign of the previous empress had been short, and the turnover in monarchs before that had been all too frequent. Many in the civil service had served in the Imperial Court going back three dynasties. They had become accustomed to arbitrary rule and corruption. It was only natural that they should come to think of their ministries and departments as their own personal domains.

"Oh," Youko said, "that reminds me. Just as I figured, the Ministry of Spring

turned down my proposal to hire you."

"You really made such a proposition?"

"But you know so much about education systems. It seems logical that you should work in a related field, even as an undersecretary. So I made inquiries. They just laughed it off." Youko took a deep breath and let it out. "First they all laugh. They tell me it wasn't that they objected to having a lady minister around, but I just can't go around creating positions on a whim. Like they're lecturing a child. They wouldn't seriously debate the issue with me."

"I quite enjoy working alongside Your Highness."

"I like having you around too. But I was thinking of making the most of your talents."

"Well, then I shall strive to be the best assistant to Your Highness that I can be. True, it is a bit off the beaten path for me, but I've always looked forward to new challenges."

"You really do have a positive outlook on life."

"I guess because I'm such a curious person at heart."

"I see," Youko said with a grin.

"But as Sir Rakushun said, not causing trouble for the bureaucracy is often the best course."

Youko gave her a long look.

"Please forgive me," Gyokuyou said. "It wasn't my intention to listen in, but I couldn't help paying attention."

"Oh, no problem. I'm not picking fights or anything. I haven't attempted any kind of head-on confrontation. They politely ignore everything I say."

"Yes, honestly speaking one's mind is to be preferred."

"Nobody's actually lying. Now, if I went around pretending we were all one big happy family, the bureaucracy and me, *that* would be a lie."

"Still—" Gyokuyou started to say, but seemed to reconsider.

The Empress of Kei lived a life of isolation. The Imperial Court was divided

down the middle by competing factions, with various parts of the bureaucratic turf staked out by the ministers. They sucked up shamelessly, and treated her as a piece of ornamentation that came with the throne.

"They keep their distance and never open up enough to make even possible to pick a fight with them. So I can't say that Rakushun giving me advice like that even matters."

"But he's your friend, right? We're probably more reticent when it comes to revealing our weaknesses to our friends, but it couldn't hurt being a bit more straightforward."

"Yeah, I suppose," said Youko, staring up at the ceiling. "I'm not being straight with him. To tell the truth, I've made no friends among the ministers. I'm pretty much a complete outsider. I wouldn't look forward to that. And it's not that I'm against revealing my weaknesses. I'm against coming across as weak and pathetic. Against being despised and ridiculed. Rakushun's the kind of guy who offers advice and counsel before getting around to the ridiculing part."

"You don't want to cause him unnecessary concern?"

"There's that too. Becoming a burden. But that's not really it either. I want to stand tall."

Gyokuyou blinked. "Stand tall? Because he's your friend?"

"I don't mean for appearance's sake." Youko smiled wryly and picked up the teacup. For several seconds she pursed her mouth, a concerned look on her face. "I don't think everything's coming up roses for Rakushun."

When Gyokuyou tilted her head to the side, Youko looked up and smiled. "I know he always tries to be the bearer of good news, but I have to wonder, you know? His mom is back in Kou, and the way things are headed there he's got to be more than a little concerned. It's not like he can call her on the phone and see how she's doing. Whether she's in good health. Without knowing that, how can he sit back and enjoy life as a college student?"

"That definitely would be cause for concern."

"I can fill him in about what's going on and try to calm his concerns that way. Still, that can't be expected to set his mind at ease. Even bringing his mom from

Kou to En wouldn't likely settle things. She'd be another refugee who'd left her kingdom. And with the disposition of his mother settled, he'd surely be troubled by the growing chaos in the kingdom of his birth."

"I would agree with that assessment as well."

"It sure seems that way to me. And being in college is tough enough. It seems he can't get enough formal instruction through regular channels and is relying on home study."

"The En Taiho did report that his grades are very good."

"Yeah, I suppose. But I'm worried that if he spends the bulk of his time in home study, he won't make the most of his college experience, like forming relationships with classmates and professors. En is a wealthy kingdom and the standards at its universities have got to be pretty demanding. A student only exposed to a district academy in Kou who suddenly finds himself attending an En university has got to feel like a fish out of water."

"Indeed."

"It's tough getting by in a kingdom you know nothing about, in a city you know nothing about, in a completely different environment. And on top of everything else, Rakushun in a hanjuu."

"En is quite different from Kou and Kei."

"And not just the politics," Youko agreed.

A hanjuu could attend college in En, could get a job, could even become a minister. Though the first time they had visited Gen'ei Palace, the Minister of Heaven had presented Rakushun with a set of clothes.

"We may be equal before the law, but the law has no rule over people's hearts. So the Minister of Heaven telling Rakushun to get dressed in 'grown up clothes' may have been his way of saying that he didn't want him walking around the palace *like that*. It was never clarified whether doing so was against protocol or was simply considered ill-mannered."

"Such things are bound to happen."

"And all the more so at college, even at an elite institution that educates the

cream of the crop. You graduate and are pretty much guaranteed a job in government, right? The training ground for the future leaders can be divorced from the demands of national dignity, right? I don't think they'd be pleased by the site of a big rat sauntering about the place. Take discrimination and prejudice out of the equation and there's still no denying Rakushun looks like a little kid. He's got to find it all a pain in the neck."

"That well may be so."

"But Rakushun hasn't said a thing about it. And I can't believe that's because it's not getting to him. No matter who you are, get treated irrationally and those feelings are going to accumulate. At the end of the day, we all wince when we're hit and laugh when we're tickled."

When harsh and vexing things happened, the reaction was predictable. But Rakushun never wore his heart on his sleeve and went around groveling for sympathy.

"I can't believe that everything's all hunky-dory. And that he's fitting in as easy as he implies. I don't think anybody really ever gets used to being given a hard time. If you asked him, he'd probably say it just means he's gotten used to his surroundings. But that's not the same thing. There's no way it can't hurt. I think what it comes down to is that he's figured out how to shrug it off."

"Probably."

Youko rested her chin on her hands. "It's really something." She smiled at Gyokuyou. "You too. It's got to be harsh to be kicked out of a country for totally illogical reasons. But you took it as a good opportunity to visit schools all over the place. You got beyond it. You kept moving forward. I'm totally impressed."

"Well, I consider myself an optimist by nature."

"Undoubtedly," Youko laughed. "But it's great the way you maintain a positive look on life. When I heard about how well Rakushun is doing, I figure that I've got to keep at it too. Knowing that it can't be all such smooth sailing and still not whining and holding your head high—when I see that, I figure I've got to buck up and try harder."

Gyokuyou smiled. "A positive attitude can be contagious."

"So it seems. That's what keeps you going. You can't do the ministerial job you're good at, but you don't go around with a chip on your shoulder. That makes me think that as bad as things are, we're a long ways from hitting rock bottom. It's not so bad that I can't say I'm getting by, that at least I've got my health and stuff. So when Rakushun says how he's doing okay, I feel I have to face my own demons as well."

"I understand that feeling very well."

"I know this is mere bravado. But bravado is better than nothing, don't you think? I'm not talking going overboard or anything. Just that I want to stand tall and put on a brave front and stay positive and all."

"Of course," Gyokuyou answered with a smile. "Though I suspect Sir Rakushun sees through Your Highness's bravado."

"Yeah, I know. I think that's true for both of us. But that's fine."

"I see." Gyokuyou laughed again, and Youko joined in.

Another of her court ladies hurried into the room. "I am sorry for barging in like this."

"What's up?"

"The Taiho has something he must see you about at once."

Taking note of the bowing court lady, Gyokuyou got to her feet. "I'll get you a change of clothes."

Youko nodded. She said to the still-kneeling court lady, "I'll see him right away."

Something must have happened to bring Keiki to her quarters at this time of night. The pretender's dead-enders raising hell somewhere, or some discord among the ministers or province lords. But if it couldn't wait until morning and couldn't be handled by the regular bureaucracy, it must be something important. She knit her brows in concern.

Gyokuyou interrupted her thoughts, holding up a cheongsum jacket for her approval. "No matter what it is, there's no sense worrying about before you find out what it is."

"Yeah, you're right."

"Times like this demand a straight back and a bit of that bravado."

"Very true," said Youko, slipping her arms into the sleeves of her cheongsum jacket.

Kei was a long ways off from achieved peace and prosperity. A mountain of problems awaited her every day. Hardly knowing her right hand from her left, she had no choice but to scramble after every problem as they came at her from all directions. Despite that, it shouldn't be too much for her to bear. There were so many people watching out for her.

"Well, I'd better get going. Thanks for the tea."

"I'll prepare some tasty for you upon your return."

"Sure, if you wouldn't mind."

From its perch, the bird watched as Youko left the room.

Dreaming of Paradise

 shishou lifted up the barely eight-year-old Sairin, revealing to her the world below. "I shall show you a dream of Paradise."

The western sun streaked across Yuunei and Choukan Palace. The countenance of the king, young both in years and the length of his reign, glowed from the rich copper glow of the Sea of Clouds. All Sairin could see in the direction indicated by the new king was the chaos left behind by meandering reign of the Late King Fu.

Yet Sairin did not doubt the words of her liege. If he was showing her his dreams, then that must be what would be.

The *Kasho Kada* was the Imperial Regalia of the Kingdom of Sai. When placed next to one's pillow, this bejeweled peach tree branch would reveal in dreams a vision of *Kasho*. Paradise.

A long time ago, the dynasty of the Yellow Emperor was foundering. In his dreams, the Emperor sojourned in the kingdom of the people of Kasho. Seeing there a vision of the ideal world, he corrected his ways.

And so it came to be said that, through dreams, this mysterious bough revealed the form a kingdom ought to take. Shishou was saying that he would show her this dream in the flesh. He would create a "Kingdom of Kasho" in this world and give it to her.

As proof of this promise, he placed the jade bough in her hand. "I'm giving this to you. Night by night, you will see for yourself as the dream draw closer to reality.

Sairin nodded and grasped the Imperial Regalia. From her perspective, Shishou was a large man, high-minded and full of hope and conviction. The arms holding her were strong, his countenance clear. His purposeful eyes took in the ever-expanding future. Self-confidence suffused his being. He would, if he could,

spend eternity in that space between the brilliant day and the slumbering night.

I shall show you a dream of Paradise.

She pressed the peach bough to her cheek. But why this maddening sense of unease? When she closed her eyes, she could still see in her mind's eye the brilliant image of Shishou and herself standing on the golden shore. In memory yet so green. Tears came unbidden to her eyes.

A dream of Paradise.

The light all but blinded her. But promises had been made. Vows had been exchanged.

Chapter 2

Sairin said, "So there's nothing to worry about. Is there, Shuka?"

Shuka managed a reassuring smile. She was in an opulent bedroom. Buried beneath the embroidered futon, the young girl turned her white, sickly-looking face toward her. Her unblinking eyes seemed to cling to Shuka. Her sunken cheeks bore the scratches from the withered tree branch.

"Yes, that's right, Taiho."

The girl seemed relieved. She again pressed the branch against her cheek. Another welt appeared along with the others. Shuka had never seen it before, this dried-out old branch that was wounding her so.

The bejeweled Imperial Regalia was obviously not this dried-out old branch. Sairin had given that one to the king's brother, Junkou. He had entreated her, she had relented, and he had presented it to his brother, who like the Yellow Emperor was befuddled as to the management of the Kingdom.

Even that seems to have slipped everybody's mind— Shuka glanced down. Her tightly-clasped hands trembled slightly. She'd heard Sairin was not well. At least that was the reason given for her fewer and fewer public appearances. Two weeks ago they had stopped altogether. For her to be confined to her bed this long pointed to only one conclusion.

The kirin chose the king. When the king strayed from the Way, persecuted the people, and laid waste to the land, the kirin bore the weight of that failure. Heaven made its choice known through the kirin, and took the throne away from a failed king by taking the life of the kirin.

Hence, the sickness brought on when the king strayed from the Way was called the *shitsudou*, meaning literally, "the loss of the Way."

For the Saiho to be struck down by the shitsudou meant the dynasty's demise.

The ministers were all scrambling about trying to discover the truth of Sairin's condition. But none of them had the means to ascertain her actual condition, for she had secluded herself in her manor. Permission to visit had not been granted. Her personal physician, the Royal Surgeon, wouldn't divulge anything.

The Chousai convened the Rikkan and together they converged upon Jinjuu Manor. Finally, Shuka alone was granted an audience.

Shuka wondered why the Chousai, the head of the Rikkan, had not himself sought an audience. But now it was obvious that Sairin could no longer leave her sickbed. Hence Shuka, the sole woman in the Rikkan, had been allowed to see her.

She is ill. The downfall of the Shishou Dynasty had begun. Seeing Sairin's condition made it clear.

"Daishito—" said the lady in waiting. Her unspoken message was that it was time to leave.

Shuka stood there wordlessly, head bowed. The weeping Sairin still clung to the withered branch. Shuka nodded. She touched Sairin's hand.

"Taiho, I have to leave now. Please rest and be well."

Sairin looked up at her, horror in her eyes. "Shuka, you're not going to abandon me as well?"

"There is nobody in Sai that could abandon the Taiho."

"But His Highness has. Sai and me and everybody."

"Oh, that can't be true. They wouldn't do that. It's just that everybody is as such loose ends and all. It won't be long until His Highness is back to his old self."

She forced a painful smile to her lips. But Sairin shook her head forcefully. "That's not true. Not in the slightest. He said he would show me his dreams."

"And I'm sure he will. But there are bound to be setbacks while building for a long dynasty. That's all this is."

"You're lying!" Sairin cried out. The only vibrant thing in her drawn, enervated face was the color of her eyes, eyes that relentlessly followed her. And even they seemed colored by animosity. Shuka could not believe that this young girl, the

incarnation of benevolence, could be capable of such an expression.

"A vision of paradise—" Her hoarse voice made it sound like a curse. She tightly clasped the branch to her chest, as if clinging to her last hope.

"Taiho, you need to rest."

"From the start, it was nothing but a dream. And drifting farther and farther away." She grabbed Shuka's arm as if to prevent her from leaving. "Help me. It is too unbearable. I feel as if I'm being torn limb from limb."

Shuka couldn't think of anything to say. The thin fingers dug into her flesh.

"Taiho, please—"

The lady in waiting intervened between them. With a look she urged her to withdraw. "Daishito, you should take your leave as well."

Shuka bowed and turned toward the door. Behind her she heard a thin, high scream. "You're lying! You're lying! *Not once have these dreams ever come true in Sai!*"

Chapter 3

Shuka left the room, the girl's screams stinging in her ears like a whip on her back.

How did it come to this?

In the beginning, Shishou was an outsider whose praises she'd heard being sung. He'd been accepted into college at breakneck speed. His professors had filled his card in a mere two years.

University graduates usually went into government service. Or rather than starting out as a clerk or undersecretary in some lowly bureaucratic post, it was also common practice to accept a military commission as a junior grade officer right out of college. Shishou had designs on a generalship, and his future was all but guaranteed.

But Shishou hated the king and wanted no part of the government. And so he resigned his post.

At that time, Sai was ruled by King Fu. The dynasty was coming to a close and the kingdom was crumbling. Bad governance and foolish laws followed one after the other. The criticism of the ministers only made King Fu more intemperate. Drowning his sorrows in women and alcohol, he allowed his duties to go by the wayside.

Most of the ministers who were critical of the king were ignored or replaced. These ousted ministers offered Shishou patronage. In Yuunei, he pulled together a band of fellow sympathizers, and the voices of censure grew louder. A similar band of young activists outraged at King Fu's misrule gathered around him. Shuka counted herself among them.

The movement led by Shishou eventually gained the support of the people. They called themselves "Kouto." During the dynasty of King Fu, it was Shishou who led the people and fought the insanities that he wrought, and fought the

devastation after King Fu died.

As soon as the flag was raised over the Rishi, Shishou went on the Shouzan. As everybody expected, Sairin chose him as the next king. This imperial accession was one that seemed right and proper. Not only Sairin, but everybody who knew Shishou believed in the new king. It was inconceivable that the dynasty should begin to founder after only twenty years.

Shuka left the courtyard almost at a run. Back in the palace annex, the Rikkan was waiting in a high state of anxiety. Seeing her, several rose from their chairs. Feeling the weight of their expectations, Shuka looked away.

The head of the Rikkan had, like Shuka and so many members of Kouto, entered the Imperial Court in his relative youth. With their ideals guiding them, they had banded together to fight the downfall of the kingdom. Shuka was well aware of their temperaments. The trust they placed in the new king and the expectations they had for the new court were reflections of their own hopes and aspirations. They couldn't bring themselves to admit aloud that things could have gone so badly.

They grasped the situation from the look on Shuka's face alone. Their countenances filled with bitter mortification. Those who had risen to their feet sat down again in exhausted resignation. The silence filled with strained sighs. One of them finally arose and in a low voice urged them to leave. It was Shuka's husband, Eishuku, the Chousai.

"Sitting here won't accomplish anything. We have confirmed the truth of what we needed to know. With these doubts settled, we must think seriously about how to address it." He looked at the rest of the Rikkan, who appeared too drained to even raise their voices in reply. "What's to be gained from giving up? Now is the time for us to roll up their sleeves and get to work."

In response to Eishuku's scolding, the members of the Rikkan nodded. With pensive faces, they got to their feet and shuffled from the room, leaving Shuka and Eishuku behind. Eishuku finally departed as well, with Shuka hurrying to keep up.

He asked in a low voice, "Do you think she will recover?"

"That—of course—"

—is a forgone conclusion, she wanted to answer, but couldn't force the words out of her mouth. Examples of a Saiho recovering from the shitsudou were few and far between.

Shishou was the king fated to rule this kingdom. On top of that, he was Eishuku's older cousin and long-time friend. Eishuku had grown up more like Shishou's brother. Even after Shishou left their home town, their unrivaled friendship continued, and when he went to Yuunei and organized Kouto, Eishuku was the first to join. They raised the banner of righteousness and fought the destruction of the kingdom.

They even made the Shouzan together. From the founding of the new court until now, Eishuku had been Shishou's number one supporter. He couldn't bring himself to say that Shishou had exhausted the Mandate of Heaven. Or perhaps he was simple incapable of articulating the sorrow he felt at the moment.

As if sensing the reason for Shuka's hesitancy, Eishuku stopped in the corridor and pressed his fingers to his temples. He hung his head in obvious distress and moaned softly. Shuka couldn't think of what to say, so instead she pressed her hand against his back.

In the adjoining courtyard, a peach tree was in full bloom. The flowers petals danced and scattered in the wind, like a dreamworld dissolving. There was something terribly sad about the sight.

Dreaming of Paradise—

It may have all been a dream. Thirty years before, Shuka was nothing more than an angry young student outraged at the mismanaged reign of King Fu. When she moved to Yuunei to attend the district academy, she joined Kouto and met Shishou.

There they had nursed a single dream. They believed that if everyone shared that dream and saw it through to fruition then Eden awaited them. The glorious past they shared together, arguing through the night about the world they would make, leading the people against King Fu's corrupt rule and then against the devastation that followed.

During those heady times, Shuka and Eishuku had pledged to stand behind Shishou all the way. Shuka was twenty-two, Eishuku twenty-six, and Shishou

twenty-five. A mere three years later, Shishou was placed upon the throne.

Thinking back about it now, it seemed like an impossible dream. They had been so alive and so young—surrounded, it seemed, in a brilliant white light that was now painful to behold.

Eishuku finally raised his head. "What do you think we should do next, Shuka?"

"Whether or not the Taiho recovers all depends on whether Shishou can be brought back in accordance with the Way. If we could somehow remonstrate with him—"

"And how would we do that?"

Shuka didn't have a ready answer.

"What would we remonstrate with him *about*? Where has Shishou gone wrong?"

Shuka only shook her head. *If I knew that—*

"We don't know what to remonstrate with him about, yet we're supposed to take him to task? Shishou?"

Shuka had no counter-argument here either. Had Shishou, like King Fu, abandoned the government for a life of debauchery, or if he was committing outrages against the people, she could understand the source of the shitsudou. There would be something for them to criticize.

But since his coronation, Shishou had devoted himself whole-heartedly to the job. As far as Shuka could see, he hadn't deviated from the Way since acceding to the throne. From every possible appearance, the kingdom appeared to be on the right track, and Shishou's deportment suggested no possible reason for the shitsudou.

Yet when she directed her attention elsewhere, that Sairin would be suffering the shitsudou became obvious. The Imperial Court remained frayed at the edges. The land remained in distress and the people impoverished. Despite a reign of little more than twenty years, critical voices could be heard among his subjects.

This was because Sairin was not well, it was said, and rumors of the shitsudou soon abounded. Clearly Sai was failing.

Shishou must know that as well. Sairin's already fair features had faded and grown paler. Since the New Year, she'd increasingly voiced complaints about her condition. Shishou had expressed the proper alarm, but took it as a divine trial that would soon enough be surmounted. They need only stick to the straight and narrow and work harder and Sairin's condition would improve. The kingdom would right itself.

Heaven, he had lectured the ministers encouragingly, was giving them these trials in order to test their mettle.

Shuka looked away from her husband and stared at the dreamlike scene of the falling peach petals. The dream was taking its leave of them, like spring lingered too long in the gardens, the petals eventually scattering and fading away.

Chapter 4

The next day, the Privy Council began in a gloomy mood. The six ministers met in the antechamber of the Imperial Court. They sat there in silence, eyes not meeting. Despite the imposition of a code of silence, news of Sairin's condition was being whispered about. And the accusing glances were directed at the one person who had met with Sairin face-to-face: Shuka.

Eishuku hadn't returned to the ministerial residence the night before. Shuka didn't know whether this was due to the demands of his work, or because he'd been conferring with Shishou. Seeking him out in the antechamber, she found him slumped over in a corner of the antechamber, eyes downcast. He looked depressed.

The gong rang, bringing the meeting to order. The ministers lined up and solemnly proceeded from the antechamber into the Gaiden. Nobody spoke as they walked down the short corridor. It was not a long walk to the Gaiden, but by the time they arrived the tension covered them like a blanket.

They entered the Gaiden and arranged themselves in a line and knelt down. The tenseness all around them felt like needles jabbed into the skin.

Nobody dared look directly at the throne. The gong sounded a different tone. The pearl curtain was lowered. The ministers all realized that they had been holding their breaths. Behind the curtain the figure of the king appeared, the man who had ostensibly departed from the Divine Will.

The sound of the slight rustling of fabric echoed around the room, cutting the silence like a knife. The gong rang again and the curtain was raised before the kneeling ministers. Shuka did not wish to raise her forehead from the floor. At this moment, nothing could be more trying than beholding Shisho's face.

But the command came from the Taisai of the Ministry of Heaven to raise their heads and Shuka found herself looking directly at the throne. There her faltering

gaze met the jet black throne and Shishou seated upon it.

The sight struck her like a blow to the chest. He was wearing a black and yellow silk jacket. Seated in the throne encrusted with mother-of-pearl, arrayed against a folding screen covered with gold leaf, Shishou appeared as stunning as always. His well-exercised physique, his intelligent mien, eyes still brimming with ambition, bright with the majesty of his office.

The Taisai's order was followed by three strikes of the gong. Eishuku rose to his feet to read the meeting's itinerary. Before he could begin, Shishou held up his hand. He gazed down upon the ministers. Then his deep, ringing voice rang out in tones as crisp and clear as when he'd led Kouto.

"The Taiho's health has again prevented her from attending today's session." Addressing the ministers specifically, he said, "I've been hearing many disquieting rumors about the Taiho's condition. The Rikkan appears to be gripped by doubts sufficient to bring the Imperial Court to a standstill. And yet, as I have stated time and again, there is no reason for us to slow our pace or retreat."

The eyes of all the ministers remained focused on Shishou.

"Is it possible that governing a kingdom should be an easy thing? Do you think we could march merrily forward with no obstacles in our way and no uncertainties holding us back? If all our paths were straight and even, would a government ever lose its way? Would a king ever stray from the Way? The road ahead will only grow more difficult."

Shishou added forcefully, "However, I have seen the kingdom as it should be. That is the belief that propelled me on the Shouzan, and according to which I received the Mandate of Heaven. Ever since then, I have been surveying the road leading us to that ideal. Losing sight of that ideal is as good as parting from the Way. But I have seen what our kingdom can become, and I shall be laying the groundwork that will take us there. No matter how rough the terrain may be, do not doubt that we are headed in the right direction. If you question the strength of my convictions, it cannot be because *I* am confused in the slightest about our goals. It is because *your* ideals have faltered in the face of the steep and precipitous climb that awaits us."

Shuka caught her breath. Her ideals were indeed in a state of flux. And that was because of the irreconcilable reality before her. She could beat her head against that wall and it would not budge. She could not erase the question in her mind—that the ideals held out to them had been flawed from the onset.

As if he could read her mind, Shishou's gaze singled her out in the front row of ministers. A slight smile came to his lips. "I have not wavered in the slightest. I see as clearly as I ever have—what should have been clear to you as well all along."

Shishou glanced at the row of ministers kneeling there in the Gaiden. Shishou said in a strong, self-assured voice, "There will be no yielding to despair or confusion. Our will must not be broken!"

As if battered by his words, the Daishikou kneeling next to Shuka bent his body even lower. The robes of the kowtowing ministers to her right and left rustled like falling leaves. Only the image of profound discouragement on the exhausted Eishuku's face swam into the vision of the bewildered Shuka.

He turned his face away, sighed, and then glanced over his shoulder at the ministers. His eyes met hers. He subtly shook his head

With a great sense of sorrow, Shuka lowered her head. *So that's that.* Eishuku must have visited Shishou the night before. They would have spent the night hashing over Sai's problems and Sairin's condition. Her crushing realization was that Shishou's pronouncement must be the product of the night's discussion.

Any doubts about Shishou or misgivings about his ideals would be put down to disappointed expectations and a lack of fortitude.

And yet— Shuka had seen Sairin. If she wasn't suffering from the shitsudou, then what? This incarnation of charity had cursed Shuka from her sickbed—with a look that spoke more of a heart filled with hate.

Chapter 5

Shuka persevered through the Privy Council, feeling like a cold, black lump was lodged in the pit of her stomach. Sitting in Shishou's field of view alone was unbearable. Even after the Privy Council had concluded and she was out of his presence, her anxieties grew all the keener. She returned to the manse overwhelmed by the oppressive gloom surrounding her.

"Welcome home," said Seiki, her valet, upon her arrival at the residence. And then, "Are you all right?" He'd probably been informed about her return by the watchman. He had prepared two cups of tea. They sat down and he studied her face. "You look even worse than when you left."

"I'm okay. Just a little tired."

"Oh, is that it?" he replied in an unconvinced tone of voice. He placed the teacup on the table. Mumbling something about the air being bad and the light being too strong, he hurried around opening the windows. Then he turned down the wick on the lamp, moved the folding screens around, and generally straightened up the room.

Seiki had a small, round frame, and the way he flitted about the room reminded Shuka of a pudgy sparrow. She finally was able to sit back and take a breath. He'd always had that uncanny ability to put her at ease.

"That's why I'm always telling you not to burn the candle at both ends. That's what you were doing last night, right? I've been checking the lamps."

"Well, then doesn't that mean you've been doing the same thing?"

"Not a problem for me, sister. Once you've left for work, I can find some time during my regular duties to take a nap."

Shuka laughed. She wasn't actually Seiki's sister. Nor was he related to Eishuku. He'd been orphaned during the chaos following the death of King Fu.

Eishuku's mother Shinshi had taken him under her wing.

Shinshi was also Shishou's aunt. She was a compassionate person. When Shishou's mother had died, she had taken her place, and had profoundly influenced Shishou's life. After his coronation, he had listed her upon the Registry of Wizards and had appointed her Taifu in the Sankou.

She was his tutor, and from his youth until the creation of Kouto, he and Eishuku had been inseparable. He referred to Eishuku as his "big brother," and then to Shuka as his "big sister." At the age of nineteen, he encountered no objections to being listed as Eishuku's undersecretary on the Registry of Wizards. After that, he'd worked as the manager of Eishuku's estate.

"Will Eishuku-sama be making it home tonight?" Seiki asked with a concerned glance at the door.

"Hard to tell. He's really had a lot of things on his plate of late."

"And how was he today?"

"The atmosphere at the Imperial Court was pretty tense prior to the Privy Council. But Shishou put the ministers' minds at ease."

Shuka winced to herself. At the mention of the Imperial Court, Seiki raised his eyebrows as well. "Then His Highness is as determined as ever?"

"Whatever you call it, it's worse than it's ever been."

The rest of the minister had departed, buoyed by Shishou's bravado. Shuka alone had gone away feeling worse. The sight of Shishou as ambitious as ever and the ministers eager to believe everything he said felt like an oppressive weight on her chest.

Shishou was a "Whirlwind King." There was no telling whether his bright flame would burn long or burn itself out. There was no doubt that Shuka and the other members of Kouto had believed completely in Shishou's greatness. *Of course* he was the first to depart on the Shouzan. *Of course* he was chosen. His whirlwind ascension needed no apologies.

The people supported Shishou as they had Kouto. He was seated upon the throne to great acclaim. The Imperial Court was speedily reconstituted. Kouto

was bursting with supporters of the new regime, and all the political factions sharing their same ideals. The road ahead was clear, and they marched forward hand in hand. The destruction accompanying the empty throne was kept to a minimum, the new court was reformed in the flash of an eye and began to govern.

Everybody believed they were seeing the auspicious dawn of a new dynasty. Except that Sai in reality hadn't worked out the way they'd all imagined. From the start, the Imperial Court stumbled over its own feet again and again.

Shishou's first order of business was to make a clean sweep of the officials who had aided and abetted King Fu during the latter days of his delinquent rule, and who had helped themselves to the Imperial Treasury. A great many of them were sacked. But that only brought the business of government to a standstill.

Still, thought Shuka, that really couldn't be blamed on Shishou.

With the dismissal of all the corrupt bureaucrats, the remaining civil servants found themselves shorthanded. And not only that, those used to sucking up to the powers-that-be and feeding at the public trough quit out of spite or refused to work. Things got to a point where firing all of the hold-outs would have made it impossible to get anything done.

The only remaining recourse was to swallow hard and rehire most of the people they'd just fired. But then it was the citizenry who became outraged. Why were these obviously corrupt officials being rewarded so? The criticisms billowed up like threatening thunderstorms.

The officials themselves were hardly grateful to Shishou for their resurrected careers. They grew more arrogant. From one end of the kingdom to the other, they resumed plucking the loose change from every peasant's pocket.

All this did not mean that Shishou had strayed from the correct path. The ones who deserved the blame were those civil servants who shamelessly continued to do wrong, even in the face of open censure.

But neither was Shishou immune to criticism. Judged by the end results, he should not have been satisfied with the way he was running the bureaucracy. In many ways, Shuka wondered if the government had made any progress at all since the reign of King Fu. The lot of the commoners certainly hadn't improved in

the meantime. Rather, long-accumulated assets were slowly and steadily being worn away.

There wasn't much point to Shishou heading down the same path as King Fu. And yet, as Shuka pointed out, he remained undaunted. "We just have to correct our mistakes. We must remain firm in our conviction. We can't think of retreat now."

"I guess so. But, you know, isn't that what you'd expect from him? At times like this, it's just not anybody who could get the ministers to calm down. Aren't you most likely to distrust somebody else is when you trust yourself the least? Seems obvious to me."

With a nod to himself, Seiki's full cheeks dimpled in a grin. "It's not like ordinary people, you know. There's no way that our Shishou-sama could have parted from the Way in so mundane a fashion. I'm sure of it."

"Yes," Shuka answered, but without any conviction in her heart.

Part II

 Despite Shuka's concerns, most of the ministers adopted Shishou's sense of conviction as their own and cast their doubts aside. Any diagnosis of Sairin's illness as the shitsudou must be mistaken. And even if it wasn't, if they all put their shoulders to the wheel, her condition was sure to improve.

An optimistic atmosphere suffused the Imperial Court. But the liveliness that had returned to government affairs pained Shuka all the more.

Shishou took to the administration of the kingdom with greater vigor. But for all this enthusiasm, his governance was as chaotic as ever. Shishou's words and actions never matched the clarity of his faith and vision. Confusion blossomed like dandelions. What was stated as a fact at noon would be contradicted by sunset, the cycle repeating itself several more times for good measure before the day was done.

From Shuka's perspective, this was proof that, rattled by Sairin's illness, Shishou was wildly changing course. Whether intentionally oblivious to what he was doing or not, he drove himself into one corner after another, just as he had before.

Anybody pointing this out to him would be severely censured. With the rule of law becoming as certain as a drunken man's walk, the Daishikou also remonstrated with Shishou. The exasperated Shishou lashed back, shaking up the Imperial Court once again. Those ministers who had turned their eyes from the possibility before were forced to consider that he had indeed strayed from the Way.

The Privy Council sank into a collective depression. And then in the midst of all this, early one morning Shuka was shaken awake.

"Seiki?"

"I'm sorry for disturbing your sleep, but something had come up. The Shousai

is here."

Shuka leapt out of bed. That the vice-minister of the Ministry of Heaven should be visiting the manse at this hour—

"Did he say why?"

"Something of a confidential nature. He appears very distraught. I've been trying to get him to calm down. The sooner the better, if you don't mind. I've shown him into the parlor."

"What about Eishuku?"

"He arrived home after you went to bed, dead on his feet. He's asleep in the study. It'll take you a few minutes to get dressed, so I guess now would be a good time to wake him up. He's bound to be in a bad mood, though."

Shuka nodded. She changed quickly. Straightening her clothing she noticed that her hands were shaking. She couldn't dismiss from her mind the thought that something bad had happened to Sairin.

She left the bedroom, her head spinning, and hurried down the hall to the parlor. The pale face of the Shousai came into view. Before the question could leave her mouth, Eishuku rushed in after her.

"Something's happened—"

The Shousai bowed. He was trembling noticeably. "The Chousai requests that you come at once to the Left Palace Annex."

"The Taiho—" The same question had obviously been on Eishuku's mind.

The Shousai shook his head. "Not the Taiho. The Taishi. The Taishi is dead."

Shuka started and looked at Eishuku. When he acceded to the throne, Shishou had listed his parents and siblings on the Registry of Wizards, bestowing royal titles on them, and set them up in the Imperial Palace.

Daishou, his father, had made a name for himself as a great man of character, as had Daishou's younger brothers and sister, Shinshi foremost among them. Shishou's younger brother, Junkou, had backed him since the founding of Kouto.

All of his immediate family members had been given high positions in the

government. Shishou made Daishou Taishi (Lord Privy Seal) and head of the Sankou. Shinshi was the Taifu (Minister of the Left), his second-in-command. And Junkou filled the final seat as the Taiho (Minister of the Right).

According to long-established precedent, his family members were given manors in the East Palace complex, including Daishou. There was no reason for bad fortune to befall him. And as he was listed on the Registry of Wizards, no reason for any unexpected disease to strike him down.

"That's unbelievable."

"It seems that—that someone took his head—"

Shuka cried out in alarm. Eishuku advanced on the man like a shot. "Such a thing is not possible! Are you saying that the Taishi was murdered?"

"Y-yes," said the Shousai, bowing even lower.

It had happened as dawn was breaking. In Choumei Palace at the heart of the Imperial Palace, Shinshi had come running to the nightwatchmen's station in a high state of distress. Something strange was going on in the Seiden.

Shinshi lived in Choumei Palace with Daishou. Daishou had rooms in the Seiden, while Shinshi lived in a nearby manor. She said she'd been woken up by a strange feeling. An unexpected sound, a sense of foreboding. Unable to get back to sleep, her attention was drawn to the Seiden where Daishou was staying. She went to his room in Choumei Palace.

The servants who trailed after her were equally shocked by what they found there. The furniture was upended and thrown about. Blood covered the walls and pooled on the floor. And in the middle of the pool was Daishou's practically headless body.

"Shishou's mother? What about her?"

"She appears shaken, but in one piece."

The servants woke the rest of the staff and left Shinshi in their care. They were about to fetch somebody from the Ministry of Summer stationed at the East Palace guard tower. Yet upon opening the gate, they discovered the two nightwatchmen stationed there were in the same sad state as Daishou.

"Nobody knows who penetrated the perimeter? What about the other residents of the East Palace?"

"They are all in their residences. Except for the Taiho."

"The Taiho—you mean, Junkou?"

"Yes," the Shousai nodded, raising his white face. "We're searching for him, but he seems to have disappeared. We've questioned his servants in Kaei Palace. They say he left to visit the Taishi and never returned."

A profound silence followed. The death of the King's father and the King's brother apparently absconding—what did it all mean?

"I can't believe it—" Shuka gasped, looking at Eishuku.

He shook his head. It wasn't possible. Junkou was the polar opposite from his brother, trusting and straightforward, yet discrete. He wouldn't hurt a fly. Not to mention that Daishou was his natural father. Patricide was out of the question.

Eishuku must have thinking the same thoughts. He nodded. "In any case, keep looking for him. What about His Highness?"

"He's been informed. Things being what they are, for the time being His Highness asked that only the Rikkan be informed, and privately. He will be waiting for the Chousai in the Left Palace Annex along with the Taifu and Taisai. He would like to confer with you as soon as possible."

"I'll leave at once," Eishuku replied.

He quickly got ready and left for the Naiden Annex. After seeing him off, Shuka sat down on the floor of the manse in stupefied amazement.

What was going on?

The dynasty was faltering, the ministers were in a constant state of consternation, and then *this* abomination. The murder of the king's father, of all things, and the disappearance of the king's brother. The East Palace where they lived was located deep within the heavily-protected Imperial Palace. Access to the king and those who lived with him was forbidden to all but a select number of servants from the Ministry of Heaven.

Shinshi was Eishuku's natural mother, but even Eishuku hadn't once visited his

mother in the East Palace. Guards from the Ministry of Summer watched the gate and did not venture into the palace grounds. Only in the deepest part of the Imperial Palace would the guards be content to guard the gates alone.

"Why—

Shuka knelt on the cold floor. Accompanied by the scent of herbs, a cup of tea was placed in front of her.

"You've certainly been in low spirits all night."

"Seiki—"

"You may feel that way, but there's no sense in making yourself physically low. You're going to catch cold." Seiki grinned as he helped her to her feet and sat her down in a chair. "Now sit there and calm down. It doesn't look like any kind of revolt is in the works."

"Not a revolt," Shuka repeated.

"What kind of revolt would target the Taishi?"

"You do have a point there," Shuka said to herself, picking up the teacup. The smooth porcelain warmed her palm. "Yes, it cannot be a revolt. Perhaps a grudge or vendetta. But by whom?"

"Who knows. But basically speaking, aside from the people who live there, only officials from the Ministry of Heaven and the Ministry of Summer and the guards have access to the East Palace."

"Someone among them?"

"By process of elimination, but I still have to wonder. The Taishi was not a person who gave people any reason to hate him. Not to mention that carrying weapons into the East Palace is strictly prohibited. The guards at the gate are armed, but they must take off their swords before venturing inside. Not even the King is exempt. Other than the people living there—"

Shuka almost dropped the teacup, catching herself at the last second. "Seiki—you're not suggesting—!"

"But we've ruled out any of the residents of the East Palace. We've got to follow this logic through to the bitter end."

"Y-yes, you are right—"

"The guards at Choumei Palace were probably not killed by a visitor to the palace. It was the nightwatchmen who were on duty, you see. If we rule out those living in the East Palace, then before getting to Choumei Palace, they must have first passed through the East Palace. If the East Palace guards had spied anybody, then they surely would have warned the Choumei Palace guards."

"Seiki, if that's true, then that can only mean somebody in the East Palace—"

Seiki smiled patiently. "That's why I said to wait till I was through. If it was someone from outside the East Palace, they would've had to pass through the East Palace gates. There are guards posted there, so they couldn't have done so unnoticed. It was the dead of night, to begin with, and the guards wouldn't just take somebody's word for it and open the gates. This does seem to point to an occupant in the East Palace. However, there are a number of manors in the palace complex, and walls between them, and guards posted at the gates. The gates are secured at night when the nightwatchmen take over. Wouldn't somebody in the East Palace wishing to visit somebody in Choumei Palace first have to exit the gates of his own residence?"

"That would be the case."

"How would this madman keep the guards of his own residence from talking?"

"Well, the same way as the guards at Choumei Palace—"

"I'm afraid that would only make the situation worse. True, it would keep them from talking, but killing one's own guards would be a dead giveaway. So much for your alibi."

Shuka nodded in agreement. "Then who? If not someone *inside* the East Palace, and not someone *outside* the East Palace—?"

"Thinking this through logically, then the most suspicion would fall on Junkousama, especially with him not being around to defend himself. But I don't think so."

Seiki tilted his head to the side, a strange expression rising to his face.

"What?"

"Oh, nothing. Just that I was suddenly struck by a curious thought. I'm sure it has nothing to do with this."

"What has nothing to do with this?"

Seiki hesitated. "No, really," he insisted. But then he wasn't so certain. "Well, it occurred to me that there might be another gate."

"Another gate?"

"Yes, a gate inside the East Palace."

Shuka's eyes widened with surprise. Yes, there definitely was. A gate leading from the Koukyuu to the East Palace. It would allow someone to enter the East Palace without passing through the palace gates.

"Shishou—"

Only Shishou had access to it. Shishou had been sleeping that night in the Imperial Residence in the Seishin. The Koukyuu ("the palace at the back") was immediately behind the Seishin, and there was that passageway to the East Palace.

The Koukyuu wasn't in use and had been shuttered and locked, as were the gates leading to it. No guards were posted there. In short, somebody in the Seishin could make his way undetected into the East Palace simply by removing a lock and a bolt.

"No, no, this is no time to be harboring such vile thoughts. Not when everything is still up in the air."

"But—"

A thought flitted through her mind. Enraged by the Daishikou's remonstrations, Shishou had rebuked and then sacked him. Shishou of late, despite his spirited behavior, had clearly lost it. If Daishou had found fault with Shishou, and in the end they had come to blows—

"No, no. Aren't the East Palace and the Koukyuu separated by walls? Kijuu can't be ridden inside the Imperial Palace, but only because of custom and protocol, not because kijuu aren't incapable of it. That means someone with a flying kijuu could skirt that obstacle quite easily. It'd be possible to approach the

Imperial Palace above the Sea of Clouds and make your way into the East Palace. Even a foreign spy could pull off something like that. The walls and gates are more feel-good measures and ways of preserving people's privacy, not guaranteed no-trespassing measures."

"Yes, that is true," Seiki said with an emphatic nod. Then his face grew grayer. "In any case, Taiho Sairin is an equal concern. We don't want something like this making her condition any worse."

Part III

The next day, the Ministry of Heaven made the news of Daishou's demise public. Nothing was said about the cause of death. The confusion and unease deepened. For the first time in a long time, Shishou didn't attend the Privy Council in the Imperial Court that day or the next.

Then in the evening, he suddenly showed up dead drunk in the Sesshuu Provincial Offices where Sairin ruled as Marquis, causing an uproar among the officials.

That night, Shuka and Seiki were called to the Naiden Office of the Left.

Eishuku was waiting there with the Minister of Heaven. He looked dead on his feet. He hadn't returned to the manse since the announcement of Daishou's death. And not just Eishuku. The Ministers of Heaven, Summer and Fall had been shuttling back and forth between the Naiden and Gaiden without a moment's rest. Their exhaustion was to be expected, but Shuka was not a little surprised by her husband's fatigued state.

"There were a few things we wanted to ask you about, Seiki in particular."

"Me?" said Seiki, taking his seat.

Eishuku sat down as well, his desk between them. The Taisai and Shousai were also there in the room.

"The day that the Taisai passed away, you apparently had a conversation with the Taiho, the King's brother."

Seiki blinked. "With Junkou-sama—yes. We met in Shouka Park. I'd come here with a change of clothes for Eishuku-sama. We met on the way back. We chatted briefly in one of the gazebos."

"What did you talk about?" Shuka nervously interjected. "What was on his mind? He disappeared shortly thereafter."

"And his whereabouts remain unknown. That night he left the Sankou offices with the Taishi and Taifu and briefly returned to Kaei Palace, and then left again. According to his bodyguards, he went to Choumei Palace. As he wasn't sure when he would return, he left instructions for the gates to be closed at the appointed time. He never returned to his residence. He didn't again pass through the East Palace gates. Nobody knows where he is."

Daishou's corpse bore the mark of a blow from a sword on his back, more than deep enough to kill a man under normal circumstances. But it was his blessing—or curse—to be a wizard. After being wounded so, he had still tried to escape and his assailant pursued him. Daishou had received six wounds of varying sizes. The one that ended his life seemed to have been delivered to his neck as he lay on the ground.

Eishuku grimaced as he relayed this information. "Hence the inside of Choumei Manor being splattered with blood, not to mention his room and the hallways. And yet seeing all this, the Daishiba thought it a bit odd. It seemed more than a single human body contained."

"You mean—the Taiho too—?"

"I don't know. A carpet from the main hall is missing. It's possible that he was murdered as well and his body wrapped in the carpet and removed. Perhaps he managed to rout the assassin, and then overcome by the horror of the crime, fled himself. Or he assaulted the Taishi and then killed his accomplice to silence him."

"How can you—" Shuka exclaimed. "He is not that kind of person!"

Eishuku sighed deeply. "Shuka, there have been rumors about that he bore ill will toward His Highness."

"What?" said Shuka, her voice rising. "That's nonsense!"

"I didn't believe them myself and gave them no credence. The word was that he was jealous of his older brother's accomplishments. With His Highness appearing to falter, he decided to take advantage and something happened. I took such insinuations to be nothing more than vulgar gossip, but now—"

Eishuku didn't finish the sentence. He instead turned to Seiki. "I really do need

to know what transpired between the two of you in Shouka Park. Did anything about Junkou-sama strike you as out of the ordinary?"

"No," Seiki answered, and then hesitated. "Though now that you mention it, that day he did seem a bit different than usual."

Chapter 8

It was about sundown on that calamitous day, Seiki explained. Something definitely seemed to be up. Returning from the Naiden offices of the Left, he was cutting through Shouka Park when he ran into Junkou sitting in a gazebo alongside the promenade. He appeared to be deep in thought. Seiki had hesitated greeting him, but by the same token couldn't very well pretend he wasn't there.

So he bowed and said hello, and he and Junkou exchanged salutations.

"It's been a while," Junkou said, the severe look on his face softening a little.
"What brings you here?"

As the Taiho, Junkou outranked Seiki by a country mile. But Seiki had been raised by Shinshi, Junkou's mother. Since their time in Kouto together, their relationship had been quite collegial.

"Yes, it has. I'm bringing Eishuku-sama a change of clothes.

"Ah," said Junkou, his countenance clouding over. "Eishuku's been holed up there for days. He probably feels as if the weight of the world is upon his shoulders."

"He's always been a worrywart when it comes to anything involving His Highness."

Seiki smiled, as did Junkou. But then he sighed deeply and sadly. Junkou was by constitution thin as a rail. Today his complexion was even grayer than normal, lending him a somewhat forlorn look.

"Things around here would certain improve if His Highness could listen with a cool head to what Eishuku had to say. He seems to be flying off the handle more often of late."

"His Highness certainly has grown a tad impatient waiting for things to

improve."

"If only that were the case," Junkou muttered under his breath. "If His Highness understood the position he's placed himself in and how that was the reason for his impatience, then I could empathize. That's not how I see things though. He's getting more on edge every day. I can't be the only one who feels this way."

"On edge?"

Junkou nodded affirmatively. "The Taiho's condition can only be because there is something wrong with the direction His Highness is headed in. And yet he stubbornly keeps forging ahead."

"Ah—well—sure—"

"To be sure, I do not think that His Highness has lapsed into criminality. But not doing wrong does not mean one is doing right. If His Highness was doing the right thing, the Taiho would not be in the state she is in, and the kingdom would be governed more rationally."

"Um—" said Seiki, momentarily at a loss of how to respond. "I believe His Highness must be suffering terribly because he understands all this. His father and aunt have consulted with him over and over, even seeking out the opinions of people such as myself. And yet he still says he has faith. You could call that a kind of stubbornness as well."

Undoubtedly, up until the end of last year, Shishou had seemed to be laboring under a heavy cloud. Seiki had heard that he'd made repeated visits to the offices of the Sankou and the East Palace.

Along with Sairin, the purpose of the Sankou was to advise the king. Though the Sankou ranked below the Saiho, the Sankou was not beholden to the Saiho, and existed only to counsel and instruct the king. The frequency with which he called upon the Sankou—even in their living quarters—was proof of the distressed state of his mind.

But then he suddenly did an about-face. It happened after the New Year, as Sairin's condition was worsening and voices could be heard here and there hazarding that this was a harbinger of worse things to come.

Seiki thought about it. Then he looked up at Junkou. "You haven't perchance given the Kasho Kada you got from the Taiho to His Highness?"

Shishou's distress was, in a word, was the product of his idealism meeting its limits. He'd had every intention of leading them to the promised land, and yet the kingdom hadn't taken a single step closer to it. The Kasho Kada couldn't have led him astray. It had shown him a dream of what the kingdom should become.

Junkou nodded. "He was at his wit's end. I wanted to help him out a bit. I thought the Kasho Kada would alleviate some of that confusion."

"His Highness didn't actually use it, did he?"

"I don't know. When I gave it to him, he seemed quite offended. Taking something from the Taiho that he had left in her care would only make him look bad. Which is why—"

"Yes, I see."

"But he did take it. I imagine in order to return it to the Taiho."

"I don't think that was the case. Shuka-sama says that when she met with the Taiho the other day, the Kasho Kada was not in her possession."

She had instead been clinging to some ugly old twig that scratched her face. It'd really been a pitiful sight, she said.

"I see. But then using the Kasho Kada must be what accounts for his change of attitude. In the nick of time, wouldn't you say?"

Seiki blinked. "Meaning what, exactly? You mean that of course the Kasho Kada confirmed His Highness's vision of the ideal world?"

"That wouldn't be possible," Junkou unexpectedly blurted out. "Or rather, because that wasn't the case, isn't that why he adopted his present attitude?"

"Huh?"

"Up to that point, he hadn't made any mistakes. He'd made the right calls all along. Frankly, it made me a bit uneasy. Will the person who never stumbles recognize it when he does, and with something as important as the governance of the kingdom?"

"Ah, yes," Seiki nodded.

Shishou had never before experienced a personal setback that was the product of his own failings. And yet being confronted with evidence of that reality, he seemed to only harden his righteous sense of conviction.

Seiki sighed, without meaning it, a heavy sigh. If Shishou couldn't recognize these setbacks for what they were, he'd be incapable of setting things right. Continuing on in this vein would deliver Shishou to his doom. To Eishuku and Shuka, he was a friend and colleague. To Seiki, he was the honored leader. They had both been raised by the same woman. And now he and Sairin were heading down a road of no return.

"How did things every get to this point? What manner of mistake could His Highness have committed?"

Junkou asked, "Seiki, have you never doubted the rightness of his course?"

Seiki pondered the question. "No, I guess not. How about yourself?"

Junkou didn't answer for a long minute. At length he gestured to his side, offering Seiki a seat. Seiki sat down in a corner of the gazebo.

Junkou said, "I've had questions about whether what he's been aiming at all this time is truly the ideal kingdom. To tell the truth, it's been at the back of my mind for some time now." He smiled, but the expression on his face seemed closer to tears. "You probably think me a coward for saying this now. *I* think myself a coward. But still—"

"I can't say I've ever considered thoughts like that."

As far as anybody knew, Junkou had always thought the world of his big brother. He'd rushed to his side as soon as Shishou raised the flag of Kouto. Although scorned as "the dumb little brother," Junkou had never turned his back on Shishou and had worked his fingers to the bone on his behalf. Junkou was the last person on earth anybody expected to have a cross word to say about his brother.

"I appreciate that," he said. "But those thoughts have been nagging at me. The ideal kingdom my brother talks about simply seems too grandiose. Like this garden." Junkou pointed at the view of Shouka Park beyond the door of the

gazebo. "A scene of a deep mountain valley. A green hill, the overarching peaks perfectly fashioned with beautiful stones, constructed so that a spring flows down from atop the ledge in translucent streams, together forming a scene of glens and ravines."

"Yes, well, that is what it is."

"But those ridges reach no higher than the eaves. It's all on a scale much smaller than reality. In the end, it's only made to please the eye. Small enough to be formed by human hands. Small enough that human hands can keep it all in order. The pine trees looking down on the mountain stream have been pruned to look as the gardener believes they should look. The stream is untroubled by a single weed, a single spot of litter. Anything displeasing to see has been removed."

Junkou got to his feet and stood in the doorway. He glanced over his shoulder at Seiki. "There's no place here for a retiring, run-of-the-mill mind like mine."

"Taiho—saying such things—"

"Oh, I don't want anybody feeling sorry for me. I'm just saying that I understand my own limitations. I really do believe in my brother's brilliance and his unerring course. People like me are the complete opposite. My brother always talked to me about the ideal Sai. It really did strike me as a wonderful world, but left me a little sad as well. Because there would be no place for a person like me in that world."

He clenched his fist tightly. "Except that there are far more people like me in this world."

"Yes, but—"

"My big brother is a great leader. So is Shuka. And Eishuku. Everybody who came up through the ranks in Kouto. Shimmering diamonds. But the great mass of the people are like me. From their perspective, I'm small change, a stone in the road."

"Taiho, Shuka and Eishuku are definitely—"

Junkou firmly shook his head. "Real people have faults and imperfections. They're not all perfect like my big brother. *His* ideal world sounds to me like this

man-made garden. But building a kingdom is not like making real mountains and real valleys. Reality is not made of these small rocks. In the end, humans can't move actual mountains, or rivers, or forests just to improve the scenery."

"Yes, that would be a bit extreme."

"The Sai my brother speaks of sounds like a beautiful dream. I always thought of it as an ideal. The ideal Sai is not a place that can be constructed. An image held in the mind as we take each step closer to the goal—that's what an ideal should be. In that case, it doesn't matter how high the bar. That's what we call it an *ideal*, after all."

"Agreed."

"But my big brother is behaving like the ideal is the reality. If you ask me, though, such a kingdom would become a prison."

"Taiho—"

"Don't you see? The picture of the perfect kingdom my brother paints is a place where the common man—the ordinary fool—couldn't live. All the ministers will know right from wrong, will keep their passions in check, and work for the good of all mankind. The people will all obey the law, virtuously and humbly, and work diligently from sunup to sundown. Those who do not are not part of the equation. Where will they go? Exile them? Execute them? In order to keep wickedness and sloth at bay will they be watched and disciplined every minute of the day?"

"Well—I—um—"

"If that is the sort of kingdom my brother desires, then I could call myself no better than one of the jailers. It wouldn't be the kind of kingdom that should ever exist. At times like this, I can't help thinking that my idea of a utopia would be one that could tolerate no small amount of laziness and conniving and stupidity and inefficiency."

"That may be true, but—"

"As we speak, my brother is making every effort to turn the ideal fixed in his mind into the real. He is striving for perfection—a reality that can never exist—with no room for doubts. I believe he is mistaken. But these are not words he is

willing to hear."

Seiki looked up at him. Junkou's face was suffused with pain.

"After that, he had nothing further to stay," Seiki concluded. "The whole thing left a bitter taste in my mouth, and so I took my leave. That was the end of it."

Chapter 9

Eishuku sat there in a heavy silence. Seiki shifted uncomfortably. At last Shuka broke in. "What the Taiho said certainly does sound like criticism of His Highness. But even supposing that he bore ill will towards the King, what would be gained by murdering the Taishi?"

"You make a good point."

"Rather—" Shuka started to say, but kept the terrifying thought to herself.

Upon returning from the Sankou, Junkou had set out for Choumei Palace. Shuka could imagine him wanting to share his thoughts with Daisho (who was both his father and the Taishi) or confer with him. Suppose that they were of one mind about the matter, and then Shishou showed up or was asked to stop by, and they brought these criticisms to light and an argument ensued? The enraged Shishou killed Daishou and Junkou escaped and fearing for his life, fled the Imperial Palace.

"I don't think it was Junkou-sama. After all the Taishi was practically beheaded."

Eishuku nodded, his expression showing equal doubts. "Would he be physically capable of such a thing? Since our time together at Kouto, I never observed him to wield a weapon with any kind of competence. You didn't either, did you?"

Fighting alongside the people, Junkou seemed more frightened of picking up a sword than he was of their enemies. Not a few called him a coward behind his back.

"No, I never did."

"He couldn't swing a sword to save his life, didn't have the heart for it. I can't believe he could wound anybody seriously, let alone take off their head." Eishuku pondered the matter for a minute. "It'd definitely have to be somebody who

knew how to use a sword."

"Then it's not Junkou, Eishuku. It'd be impossible."

"Probably," Eishuku said with a nod. He stared up at the ceiling and muttered, "Then who?" His eyes flew open. He glanced at Shuka. She answered with a small nod. That same awful realization must have struck him as well.

Eishuku gave the Taisai a flustered look and took a deep breath. Shuka sighed as well, a sigh tinged with disappointment and despair.

A second later, the door to the room crashed open. Armored soldiers from the Palace Guard poured in. Leading them was a commander of the Palace Guard of the Left. He held out a warrant for them all to see.

"I have been authorized to take the Chousai, Daishito, Taisai, and Shousai into custody on suspicion of treason."

Part IV

 Shuka froze in astonishment, as did Eishuku and the others. Their voices rose as one. *What is going on?* But to no avail. They were bound with cords and shoved into one of the rooms in the Naiden office of the Left.

They grasped only that the Daishikou had been sacked, the position hadn't been filled, so the Shoushikou, vice-minister of the Ministry of Fall, had authorized the arrest.

"Junkou was planning an insurrection, the Taishi found out, so the Taiho killed him and fled the Palace. And the Daishito—"

Her arms still bound, Shuka raised her head at the Shoushikou's emotionless mention of her position.

"It has become clear that you intended to aid and abet Junkou by meeting with the Taiho and spreading rumors of the shitsudou."

Shuka gasped in surprise. "Just a minute! Are you claiming that the Taiho's condition is a sham?"

He was implying that Sairin faked her condition and Shuka had colluded with her to spread rumors of the shitsudou, and that Sairin as well had participated in this "conspiracy." In what universe would the kirin raise the standard of revolt against her own king? She was about to raise her voice and object when the Shoushikou cut her off.

"There's no use trying to deny it."

His face was clouded with bitter mortification. It was unlikely that the Shoushikou believed a word he was saying.

"The Chousai communicated with Junkou through his servant. Eyewitnesses will testify that this servant met secretly with Shunkou-sama on many occasions."

Seiki attempt to protest this accusation but was silenced as well.

"The Taisai and Shousai, along with the General of the Palace Guard of the Right, who was commanding the nightwatchmen at the East Palace gate, helped Junkou commit his atrocity and make his escape. It has come to light as well that the Chousai conspired to cover up the evidence of their heinous crimes and pass off the Taisai's regrettable death as an accident."

The Shoushikou read the indictment in a monotone without raising his eyes.

"Out of compassion, you will be released for now, but the parties in question will remain under house arrest until and unless the Ministry of Fall orders otherwise. Soldiers will be posted at your residences, which you may not leave under any condition. Nor will any communication between yourselves be allowed."

With a brief glance, he lowered his head, as if embarrassed at what he was doing. The soldiers—who didn't appear any more enlightened than the rest of them—hauled them to their feet. Eishuku broke the silence.

"Could I ask you one question?"

The Shoushikou averted his eyes and didn't answer.

"Is this His Highness's theory of the crime?"

The Shoushikou didn't answer, but only hung his head.

Chapter 11

Shuka and Eishuku were taken, bound, to their official residence south of the Imperial Living Quarters. They were finally released in the main hall. The doors to the hall were secured from the outside. Armed soldiers in battle armor were posted about the periphery.

"Master, Mistress, I'm dreadfully sorry," Seiki cried out when they entered the living room. "This is all because I met with Junkou-sama. I've gotten you all involved in something awful." He slumped to the floor in distress.

"No, you haven't, Seiki," Shuka said, giving him a reassuring hug. "There's no way that any of this is your fault."

"But—"

Shuka shook her head. She looked up at Eishuku. "Eishuku, this is because—"

She didn't need to finish the sentence in order to be understood. Shishou believed that Junkou was at the root of some sort of coup d'etat. Nobody knew what had happened the night Daishou had been murdered. As Shuka had begun to suspect, one possibility was that, enraged by their criticisms, Shishou had attacked Daishou and Junkou.

The other possibility was that Shishou was not involved, but believed that Junkou had killed Daishou and fled. In either case, Shishou had decided that Junkou's behavior branded him a traitor. Because Junkou and Seiki had spoken together, Eishuku was implicated in the conspiracy as was his wife, who had previously met with Sairin alone.

"Why would Shishou—" Eishuku said to no one in particular, sinking into the nearest chair. "Suspecting even the Taiho—this is madness. What is the man thinking?"

"Not rationally, that's for sure."

Eishuku muttered under his breath, "A king with the shitsudou."

Shuka caught her breath.

"We've been accused of capital crimes. We'd better prepare ourselves for what's coming next."

"Do you really think Shishou would—? Does he really believe it himself? I mean, Junkou plotting a coup and all? And Eishuku and I conspiring with him?"

"If he can suspect the Taiho," Eishuku replied weakly, "then he can suspect anybody." He glanced at Shuka and Seiki. "It's like Shishou said, Shuka."

"Like he said?"

"When the time comes that you can't trust a friend, it's probably not the friend who's untrustworthy, but yourself. It's hardly likely that Shishou started out suspecting Junkou of anything. Rather, it's the realization that he has strayed from the Way that makes him willing to contemplate this nonsense about Junkou leading a palace coup."

"Unbelievable."

"Right now, the one in the most distress, the one wavering like a leaf in the wind, is none other than Shishou. He's the one so proud of his high ideals, and yet he's fallen flat on his face. He comports himself as if he's done nothing wrong, but the fact that Sai is no utopia must be as obvious to him as a fist in the face. When it comes to the kind of kingdom Sai should have been—the kind of king he should have been—the one most unwilling to face the facts is Shishou."

"That does seem to be what's going on."

"Shishou couldn't possibly miss the similarities with King Fu. In that case, he'd start seeing enemies in the woodwork, despise himself for doing so, and hate the world for making him so, prompting him to strike out—at Junkou, at me, at Shuka."

Shuka covered her face with her hands. The one person Shishou truly hated and despised was himself.

"Shishou really seems to be marching toward his doom."

Shuka raised her head. "What then will become of us? Or rather, the Taiho?"

"Who knows?" Eishuku said in a low voice. "But if death is our reward, at least we shall be spared witnessing Shishou's final downfall."

Chapter 12

The next morning, the Shoushikou came back to the main hall where Shuka and the other lay sprawled on the floor. Once the doors were again secured by the soldiers outside the hall, the Shoushikou turned to them with anguished eyes.

"Forgive me for ever letting things get to this point," he said in a small voice. His face ashen, he held out a document. "The Taihou is being sent to Sou."

"But—her condition—" said Shuka.

Anguished, the Shoushikou shook his head. "If anything, he wanted to be rid of her *because* of her condition."

"Ah," Shuka moaned. So Shishou could no longer abide Sairin's existence.

"That's why I'm here. You are to escort her," said Shoushikou. He looked at Seiki, "Only the minimal number of retainers will be allowed to accompany her. You will escort her to Houga on the Kokkyou border. Representatives from Sou will meet you there. As soon as the Taiho is handed over to the Sou ambassador, you will return to Yuunei."

Shuka bowed her head and the Shoushikou nodded. "After you return, as pertaining to the laws of high treason, you will be judged and sentenced. In other words, His Highness does not expect you to return."

Shuka found herself at a loss for words. This was their longtime comrade, Shishou, showing them compassion: *take Sairin with you to Sou and don't come back*. If they did come back, they would be prosecuted and sentenced to death for treason.

Shuka's eyes filled with tears. Shishou still had some feelings left in his heart for them. And yet he was still accusing them of treason. That he could even harbor such thoughts was the even more painful realization.

Shishou had so cornered himself that he couldn't bear criticism, couldn't admit to his own faults, couldn't ask for a helping hand in setting the Imperial Court aright. He doubted himself too much to see this supposed coup for the nonsense it was. As long as he believed that their contempt and hate for him lay at the root of this revolution, he could not allow them an honorable death.

With a trembling hand, the Shoushikou thrust the edict into Eishuku's grasp. "Please understand the state of His Highness's mind and do no return. I know it will be painful to leave Sai and await the end of the current Imperial Court. But if you do come back, His Highness will end up bearing a far more grievous sin."

"Understood," Eishuku answered. He grasped the Shoushikou's hand. "I know how hard this must be for you. You have our sincere thanks."

The Shoushikou bowed his head. "If you would forgive the presumptuousness, on behalf of His Highness, I pray for your continuing well being."

Chapter 13

The next day, in the dead of night, Shuka met Sairin at the back gate of the Imperial Palace.

"How are you faring, Taiho?" Shuka asked, peering into the palanquin being born under the direction of the Ministry of Summer.

She knelt to get a better look. Sairin answered only with the emotionless flash of her eyes. Up till now, Eishuku hadn't witnessed her enfeebled state and was clearly startled at what he saw. The exhausted young woman with empty eyes lying in the palanquin still clung to the withered twig.

With their eyes averted, they transferred Sairin to a rickety old horse cart. She was attended to by only three ladies-in-waiting. Shuka rode in an equally decrepit wagon. In order to keep things to a minimum, other than Seiki, only six civil servants were allowed to accompany them. They silently rode in the third wagon.

In the middle of the night, the gate was tightly closed. The place was deserted except for the soldiers escorting them. Officials from the Ministry of Summer held the reins. Five soldiers—watchers or guards—were assigned to each wagon. The gate quietly opened. Only the Shoushikou was there to see them off as Shuka and the others left the palace. It was an unbelievably sad parting.

It'd take over a month to reach the Koukyou by horse cart. Because Sairin was with them, they couldn't stop at ordinary inns. They slept in the wagons, traveling at night as they made their way to the Koukyou. Their shabby appearance notwithstanding, the interiors of the covered wagons were kept shipshape. They were hardly comfortable, though, and the trip was a trying one.

Equally harsh was the severity of Sairin's illness. She lay on a bed in the middle of the wagon as if in a trance. From time to time she came to herself and wept over the plight of the people. When she had cried herself out, she raised her

voice in bitter cries against Shishou. Even with her riding in a different wagon, the rest of them couldn't get those cries out of their heads.

The journey wasn't half over before Sairin's ladies-in-waiting had been worn haggard and were on the verge of nervous breakdowns. Shuka had to step in and take over their duties more and more often. And then there was no way to stop their ears or avert their eyes.

"We're all going to die, Shuka! The earth is stained with blood!"

"Taiho—don't say such things—"

"It's the truth! Shishou has cast Sai aside! A wicked era dawns. The youma lie in wait gathering their strength. But the king will tear us asunder before their swarms arrive!" Sairin clutched the withered branch with both hands. "You, me, he'll kill us all! He'll murder Sai!"

"Oh, you mustn't get carried away," Shuka said, consoling her. "Things aren't that bad." She repeated the lies over and over. "His Highness is concerned for your well being, that's all. He doesn't want to place a greater strain on your health. You should take the opportunity to rest well in Sou. Put your mind at ease."

"You're wrong! He's cast me aside! He's cast us all aside! Don't you understand, Shuka? His Highness has murdered scores! He will take everything and cast it into the fire!"

She again collapsed in tears. Shuka said, stroking her hand, "Taiho, please—"

"He wears the visage of a sage and then blesses us with dross and throws Sai to the wolves. And he said he'd show me Paradise."

"Taiho—"

"I believed in His Highness, Shuka. I waited. He said that those dreams were coming ever closer. But they've only grown farther away. Sai isn't like Paradise in the slightest. Every step taken a step into the distance. He promised me!" Sairin raised her head. "Ah, the king's aura again dims—"

"Taiho—"

Sairin clung to her. "Please. We must return to Yuunei. His Highness must be

saved. Why are you abandoning him? He is sinking alone beneath the waves.

She was clearly divided by her enmity and her love for him, scorning him with the same vehemence with which she delighted in his excellence, and her joy for having chosen him. She alternately lambasted him for abandoning his subjects, and Shuka for abandoning him.

"I don't know if I can take any more of this," Shuka wept, returning to her wagon after a lady-in-waiting relieved her.

"Shuka-sama—" Seiki placed his hand on her back. He looked up at her and said, his voice layered with concern, "I can well understand why His Highness wished to have the Taiho out of view. It is an unbearable sight."

Sairin's illness was evidence of mistakes being made. And Shishou was not the only person making them. Shishou had appointed them to the Imperial Court. Sairin's shitsudou was the fruits of their collective effort. If it was simply the results of fatigue, or the debilitation caused by the contamination by blood, it wouldn't inflict this degree of suffering. And yet her suffering had been cruelly ignored, an indifference that was evidence of the loss of the Way.

Now the consequences of that cruel inattention were being thrust upon them.

"That is something we've all had a hand in. But why?" Shuka looked at Seiki and Eishuku. Up till now, she hadn't been willing to admit to any personal fault. "The fact is, we chased that dream and nothing else. We believed that the course before us was self-evident, that the goal we were pursuing was the proper ideal, and as long as we unfurled that flag with sufficient vigor, we could make anything happen.

In the idealistic government they had founded, no one used their positions for self-interest or personal gain. When such civil servants were discovered, they were fired. But then things grounds to a halt without them so they had to be rehired. The whole affair was certainly a blunder of the first order. And it was *their* mistake, Shishou's mistake.

They had actually convinced themselves that if the crimes of the corrupt were exposed and they were punished, then they really would see the light. They would reflect upon their sins, and their humiliating example would convince others like them to change their ways. They had not allowed for the fact that

there existed corrupt officials who, indicted, punished and shamed, would never repent.

If someone had pointed out to them that the real world was not the one they naively pictured in their minds, then they might have been the ones to see the light.

"Is that where we stumbled? Just like Junko-sama said, have we been building prison walls the whole time? But we haven't been forcing people to hew to the right and killing those who did not obey."

Even the more tyrannical of the officials had been sacked, not executed. Sentences had been tempered by compassion, and every attempt was made to be benevolent. And yet the kingdom continued to sink into chaos, just as did Sairin.

As the journey continued, this fact became undeniable. The common people were plainly in distress. A good part of that distress was due to exploitation by local officials. But the rest was Shuka's fault. Though land management was in her portfolio, she had done little for the people who make their living from the land. Since the time of King Fu, the ministers had lined their own pockets first, and had left the foxes to watch the henhouses.

The farmers abandoned their allotments, the fields went fallow, the canals silted in, the dikes sprang leaks, and the villages were drained of resources by political corruption. All these facts on the ground should have demanded her attention. The course of action was clear, but the Imperial Treasury lacked the funds to address these problems.

The people impoverished by graft and corruption couldn't bear a heavier tax burden. Shishou had lowered taxes out of compassion, but had drained the treasury in the process.

Sairin's sickness, the devastation of the land, the poverty of the people—the journey brought home to her day after day the enormity of her failings. She was mightily relieved when the peaks of the Koushuu Mountains finally came into view.

Part V

The city of Houga was situated in Kokkyou in the eastern part of Sai. An official from Sou stood at the gates leading from Sai to Sou, along with a company of soldiers. Shuka and the other got off the wagons. Under the watchful gaze of the Sai military, they proceeded through the gates into Sou on foot.

The young woman standing at the head of the company bowed politely. "I am Princess Bun, daughter of the Royal Sou. I am here to welcome the Sai Taiho. I am pleased to know that you have arrived here safely."

"We deeply appreciate the gesture," Eishuku answered on their behalf.

He and Shuka introduced themselves and expressed their thanks to the princess. Bunki nodded and said, "The Chousai must be quite tired. The Sai Taiho appears fatigued as well. We have made a palace available for your use on Samei Mountain. It's not that far from Houga. Let us proceed there."

Bunki indicated a kijuu bearing a palanquin. It was only a short jump from Houga to Samei. Mt. Samei was a Ryou'un Mountain that soared above the Sea of Clouds. They set down at the foot of the mountain, and then wound through the magical tunnels, emerging above the Sea of Clouds. There was a small palace located at the peak surrounded by a large garden.

Sairin was taken to the Seiden of the palace. There she was left in the care of her ladies-in-waiting.

Bunka explained to Shuka, "The villa is used as a summer retreat. It may be a tad chilly, but considering the Sai Taiho's condition, we thought it best to stay close to Houga."

"Thank you," Shuka said with a bow.

Bunki smiled. "If there's anything I can do or anything you need, please don't

hesitate to mention it. The Sai Taiho seems to be in such a sad state that we've made available a neighboring villa for the Chousai and yourself. I hope that will meet with your approval."

"Of course it will. We truly appreciate all that you have done for us."

In fact, Bunki had taken every care possible, up to and including the villa. Flowers were arranged in the foyer. A sizable contingent of servants was waiting for them. As they had arrived with not much more than the clothes on their backs, a new wardrobe was laid out, along with all the personal effects they would need.

"Please, take your time. I'll try to keep out of your hair as much as possible. For the time being, consider this your own home."

Shuka again bowed deeply and expressed her heartfelt thanks.

Chapter 15

In fact, both Shuka and Eishuku were exhausted, and were grateful to Bunki from the bottoms of their hearts. In Shuka's frazzled state, the gesture really touched her. At the same time, though, it was very sad. The extraordinary generosity that the people of Sou were showing them—complete strangers and foreigners—stung her conscience.

A mere twenty years.

"Will the Imperial Court founder after so short a time?" Shuka asked herself sadly, gazing at the gardens from the window of the main hall of the manor. "To Sou, it must all seem a shameful performance."

Bunki came in with a basket of fruit. She answered with a perplexed smile. "No one is saying that. An Imperial Court is a hard thing to get a handle on. Especially after a revolution, the younger the court the harder it is."

"You're probably right."

"It is usually the case," Bunki stated with a reassuring smile. "But that aside, what will Shuka-sama and Eishuku-sama be doing henceforth? You were quite important ministers in your government. His Highness would like to make use of your expertise on behalf of Sou."

"Well—" said Shuka.

For a moment she couldn't deny the joy that filled her heart. There was no place for them in Sai. Her career as a minister was over. She had no idea what she would do after this. She couldn't help but feel uneasy. At the same time, that she hadn't been able to achieve what she should have as a minister filled her with regret. The opportunity to start over again as a minister in a wealthy kingdom like Sou was a lifesaver.

But Eishuku raised his voice and said coolly, "We thank you for the offer, but

we cannot agree. Our duty is to Sai. It is to our own shame that we must depend on your kingdom's resources."

"Eishuku—"

Eishuku shook his head firmly. "Shuka, we simply cannot. If you would excuse me—"

"But—" Shuka raised her voice. "Shishou said we musn't return."

"However true that might be, it doesn't mean we should rely on the kindness of strangers and put Sai behind us. We certainly know that if we return to Sai, we will be branded traitors and punished harshly for it. Death is by no means in the cards. Shishou told us to flee, and he may at least spare us our lives."

"But—"

"And even if he does not, our lives would be taken in recompense for our sins."

"We are not traitors!"

"Can we really say that we are not? Though our roles in the revolution earned us high positions in the government, we were unable to save Shishou or save the Imperial Court. The people suffered before our eyes, injustices flourished, and we were disloyal to His Highness. The slander of treason is not unjustified, is it? If we are sentenced to death on the charge of treason, then so be it."

"Eishuku—"

"If we are so fortunate that Shishou spares our lives, then there is good work left for us to do on his behalf. Returning to the Way is difficult, but definitely not impossible. We should work toward that end. If it proves illusive, and if we live long enough, then after Shishou's fall Sai will need the support of the people to keep things from falling apart. Holding up a kingdom with an empty throne is the only way we can repay the people for the injustices they suffered."

Shuka fell into silence.

"Shishou said to accompany the Taiho here and then return. That was the Imperial decree. Which means we are obligated to go back. What do you think, Seiki?"

Eishuku turned to Seiki, who as sitting quietly in a corner of the room. Seiki

sighed softly. "I had the feeling that would be the conclusion you'd come to."

"You may stay here if you wish."

"Don't be silly. If you insist on returning to Sai, I shall of course accompany you. Without me there, you wouldn't get up in time for your own execution."

Eishuku laughed and looked at Shuka. "Surely you jest," she heard Bunki exclaim, but nodded anyway.

He was right. They had destroyed Sai. Obsessed by their own idealism, they had taken reality for granted and stupidly soldiered on to no good end. That being the case, they couldn't hold their own lives dear and abandon their obligations while the people perished.

We have a duty to sacrifice ourselves in the quest for righteousness.

Chapter 16

Bunki attempted to dissuade them, but after putting Sairin's affairs in order, they left Samei Palace. The servants and ladies-in-waiting who had accompanied them remained behind. Consigning Sairin to their care, Shuka, Eishuku and Seiki descended from Samei Mountain.

Bunki reluctantly rounded up three kijuu. With her retainers at the reins, they made the return trip to Yuunei in only two days. The retainers set them down before the gates of Yuunei Palace, wished them good luck, and flew off.

They encountered no difficulties entering the palace. After all, their original orders had been to deliver Sairin and then to come back. They passed through the Fifth Gate into the Imperial Living Quarters. Entering the Naiden, they announced their return. Seeing them, Shishou's eyes darkened.

"Chousai, Daishito, what are you doing here?" inquired the Shoushikou, almost in tears. It was the Shoushikou who had previously wished them goodbye. Escorting them to their official residence, he asked bitterly, "So you intend to go to the gallows without a fight?"

"It is up to His Highness," said Eishuku. "If that is what it comes down to, then so be it."

The Shoushikou hung his head.

"The Taisai and Shousai?"

"Awaiting a decision from the Minister of Fall. The Minister is delaying as long as possible, prevaricating and stretching out the investigation. And His Highness hasn't ordered anybody to rush things."

"How is His Highness doing?"

The Shoushikou shook his head wordlessly.

"He looks pale."

"I believe he is drinking to excess. He's shown up at the Privy Council dead drunk on at least three occasions. At any rate, his heart doesn't seem to be in it. At times he'll babble on incomprehensibly or start shouting clear out of the blue. The Imperial Court is going nowhere."

"That bad—" Shuka sighed. Shishou was still ill. And his Court was quickly sinking into oblivion.

Accompanied by the Shoushikou, they returned to their residence for the first time in a long time. All the household items and furniture and anything of value left behind in their sudden departure were gone. The place had been ransacked during their absence.

"What in the world—" the Shoushikou gasped.

"Don't worry about it," Eishuku said reassuringly. "The bureaucracy seems to be running wild as well. Our personal goods are hardly that important. But we need to make sure the Imperial Repository stays intact. After this, it will become the domain of the new king that arises to save Sai."

In response to Eishuku's words, the Shoushikou flinched as if in pain. His head slumped dejectedly to his chest.

Part VI

 Shuka, Eishuku and Seiki waited patiently at the residence for their sentences to be handed down.

The gardens visible from the main hall were alive with the colors of early summer. The villa had been given them along with their political appointments, but up to this point, Shuka hadn't taken the time to really appreciate the view. She'd been so caught up in her official duties over the past twenty years that for days on end she'd barely seen Eishuku's face except at Privy Council meetings. After a while she grew accustomed to the routine and treated it like it was normal.

Perhaps becoming resigned to their fates, Shuka had mellowed to a point that finally allowed her to contemplate such thoughts.

Two days later, early in the afternoon, the Shoushikou arrived in a hurry. "Chousai, if you wouldn't mind, I'd like you to change into these clothes." He held out a manservant's outfit.

"What's this about?"

"The Taiho has been found."

"Junkou?" said Shuka, raising her voice. "Where?"

"In Suiyou Manor. He is deceased."

Shuka caught her breath. The Shoushikou explained the circumstances. Seeing the ransacked state of their residence and following Eishuku's advice, the Ministry of Heaven had commenced an inventory of the Imperial Repository. Anticipating that Shishou's reign would soon come to an end, corrupt officials were brazenly pillaging the palace right and left.

The corruption had not yet reached the inner sanctum of the Imperial Living Quarters and the Roshin. But the Ministries of Heaven and Fall increased their

audits and strengthened the security patrols. During one such patrol, deep in the Koukyuu, an official from the Ministry of Heaven detected a strong stench in Suiyou Manor, the main building of the North Palace Complex. Investigating further, he discovered the body.

Junkou's corpse had been wrapped in a rug and deposited in the Suiyou Manor stables. Enough time had passed that the body had decayed beyond recognition, but it was clear from the clothing that it was Junkou.

"Undoubtedly the same carpet that went missing from Choumei Manor. From the condition of the remains, it is apparent that the Taiho was killed shortly after the Taishi by the same assailant. The Kasho Kada was found together with the body."

"The Kasho Kada?"

"Yes. But a branch was broken off and is missing. When the killing blow was delivered, it must have cut through what he had in his pocket. In any case, hardly anybody has access to the North Palace Complex. The one person who does—"

"His Highness."

The Shoushikou nodded grimly. "Things being what they are, we can't officially report this to the King. There isn't a Taisai or a Shousai. I'm not sure what our next course of action should be. There's nobody else to assume command—"

"My mother, the Taifu—"

"She's been informed. The Taifu was hoping that you would take up the duties of Chousai—in secret."

"I see," Eishuku murmured to himself. He took the garb from the Shoushikou. "Wait here. I'll be back."

Eishuku went to his room to change. From a corner of the room, Seiki piped up. "Um, could I ask the Shoushikou a question?"

"What's that?"

"Has the missing piece of the Kasho Kada been found?"

"No," the Shoushikou said, puzzled by this inquiry.

Seiki appeared to puzzle over this as well. When Eishuku emerged from the bedroom dressed in the servant's garb, Seiki said to him, "You should search the Taiho's person very carefully. It is possible that a piece of the branch is inside his body. But in any case, please be careful."

Chapter 18

After Eishuku left, Shuka asked Seiki, "Why that request?"

Seiki hunched his shoulders as if equally confused. "Just something that occurred to me. I'm not really sure myself."

"That's not good enough, Seiki. Sit down and explain yourself."

Seiki lowered himself uncomfortably into a chair like a disobedient child about to catch a scolding. "You see, if the wounds on Taiho Junkou's body were so grievous, then it stands to reason that he was slain at the same time as the Taishi. I recall that there was a great deal of blood collected in one area. It probably mostly belonged to the Taiho."

"Yes, that makes sense. And—?"

"Why would anybody, after exacting such violence upon the Taiho's person, not leave the body there? Why go to the trouble of moving only him? A number of reasons spring to mind, but it makes more sense to me if he had the Kasho Kada with him and a branch was broken off. One way or another, the broken piece got wedged *inside* Junkou-sama's body. That made it necessary to search his body more carefully."

"But why? If the missing piece couldn't be retrieved, why not just discard it and the body together?"

"Yes, why not? So the reason for hiding the Taiho's body must have arisen out of a desire to keep it hidden as well."

"Because—?"

Seiki dejectedly hung his head. "Because the Kasho Kada belongs to Taiho Sairin-sama. Junkou gave it to Shishou-sama. So Shishou-sama would be the one who has it now."

"Oh."

"That day I met Junkou-sama, he said he'd given the Kasho Kada to Shishou-sama. Consequently, he didn't know what had become of it. Up to that day, he hadn't seen the Kasho Kada again. Then when and how did it end up in Junkou-sama's possession?"

"You mean, that night, Shishou took it with him to the East Palace?"

"That's what I think, though there's no way to confirm it. Shishou-sama could have ordered a servant to deliver it. Though if Shishou-sama indeed brought the Kasho Kada with him to the North Palace, I believe he would not have wanted it to be discovered. Because he and he alone carried it there."

"Then it really was Shishou?"

"Very likely," Seiki answered sadly.

"Why would he do such a thing?"

"Who knows? The more puzzling conundrum is why he did not simply square his shoulders and take responsibility."

"What?" said Shuka, raising her head.

"I mean, Shishou-sama is the king. Supposing he killed the Taishi and Taiho, is there anybody anywhere who could actually put him in the dock for his crimes?"

"Knowing Shishou's fastidiousness, he wouldn't want it known that he was capable of stooping to such brutality, especially at a time when the Imperial Court is in such dire straits."

"Still, why the necessity of covering his tracks so? Consider the rumors that Junkou-sama was engaging in treasonous behavior. However untrue, Shishou-sama could state that he'd caught Junkou-sama in an act of treason and had executed him and that would be that."

"If an insurrection was in the offing, both the people and the ministers might begin to doubt Shishou's qualifications to be king."

"But His Highness says that Junkou was plotting treason and killed the Taishi. And that you and Eishuku were accomplices and were helping to plan the revolt. And that it was his intent to prosecute us for the crime."

"That is true."

"I don't think it's because he couldn't say that there was a revolt. If he was horrified at what he'd done and wished to pretend it hadn't happened, crying treason would be more effective than hiding the body. Hiding the body implies he was cognizant of the crime. Then claiming that it was Junkou-sama who was at fault—and not himself—diverted attention from himself."

Shuka nodded. "Yes, that makes sense. But why?"

"I don't know. Except that the Kasho Kada really concerns me. Shishou-sama left the Taishi's body where it fell, but hid the Kasho Kada. He seems to have worried more about it than the crime of murder. Why did Shishou-sama bring it to the East Palace in the first place? And not only the Kasho Kada."

Shuka blinked. "And not only *it*?"

"Of course. Shishou-sama brought the Kasho Kada and a sword to the East Palace. It is custom in the Roshin and Enshin that other than the gate guards and security details, nobody carries a sword. His Highness as well wears a sword only in the Seishin. In Jinjuu Manor and the East Palace, neither the guards or His Highness may carry swords."

Shuka looked at him flabbergasted.

"Shishou-sama must have brought a sword with him to the East Palace. That means he intended to do harm to the Taishi and Taiho from the start."

Shishou set out for the East Palace with the Kasho Kada and a sword in hands. That doesn't necessarily mean there was murder in his heart. But it certainly revealed some level of hostility. Carrying a sword when going somewhere indicated fear or anger. There should be nothing for him to fear.

A skinny old man and a skinny young man were the only occupants of Choumei Manor that night. Neither them had ever carried a sword. They didn't pose a threat to Shishou or anybody.

"Shishou must have been mad about something. Consumed by his fury, he grabbed his sword and the Kasho Kada and headed for the East Palace."

"I think so too. The problem is, what about the Kasho Kada would make him so angry? What's the connection?"

"Shishou must have been angry at Junkou. He'd taken what belonged to the Taiho and had humiliated him."

"Wasn't that what he said when Junkou-sama offered him the Kasho Kada? Would he have remained upset with him ever since then?"

After a moment of thought, Shuka suddenly had an idea. "What if Shishou was using the Kasho Kada? He would know that his image of an ideal Sai was not a kingdom that ever would be. Hence—"

Seiki sighed. "It's likely, but hard to say. We don't know the reasons, but it's somehow connected with the Kado Kada. And it began with Junkou-sama presenting it to Shishou."

"Yes, it is," said Shuka, pressing her hand against her chest. "In which case, the fault would fall on Eishuku."

"Eishuku-sama? Why?"

"Because he was the one who originally recommended it."

The surprise was obvious on Seiki's face. "Eishuku recommended it?"

"I think so. I once came across Junkou and Eishuku talking about it. At the time Junkou wanted to offer Shishou some advice and was concerned that he had nothing to offer. He feared Shishou was going to give up on his useless little brother. That's when Eishuku made the suggestion."

Shuka happened to be passing by in the shadow of a garden bower and hadn't caught all of the conversation. So all she heard was Eishuku suggesting that offering Shishou the Kasho Kada might prove helpful, and keeping this just between them, Junkou could take all the credit.

"Oh my—" Seiki's face stiffened.

Shuka furrowed her brows. "Why do you say that?"

"Oh, no, it's nothing. I'm just a bit surprised."

"That look on your face wasn't nothing. What is it, Seiki?"

Seiki appeared to be completely at loose ends. He glanced around the room several times as if looking for a way out, and then back at Shuka.

"Out with it, Seiki. Time is of the essence here."

"Well, you see, Junkou-sama firmly denied it."

"Denied what?"

Seiki took a deep breath and let it out. "When I met him, the subject arose of Shishou-sama using the Kado Kada to confirm the correctness of his vision for Sai, and hence his conviction about the matter. Junkou-sama let me know in no uncertain terms that such a thing was not possible. The whole thing left me with a strange feeling."

"Why?"

"Because Junkou-sama had always put great stock in his older brother's opinions. If Shishou said that black was white, then that's what it was. He always measured himself as inferior to his brother. To hear this same man speak with so little reserve was unusual, to say the least."

"You may be onto something there."

"I have no grounds for the following speculation, but I have to wonder if perhaps Junkou-sama used the Kasho Kada himself."

Shuka opened her mouth to reply, but couldn't think of what to say. It was possible. Depressed at his inability to offer any constructive advice, he'd obtained the Kasho Kada from Sarin and then before offering it to Shishou, had used it himself. It was very possible. If he could ascertain what sort of place this utopia was, he would have more productive counsel to contribute.

The Kasho Kada was reserved for those who ruled the kingdom. But as a sibling to the king, Junkou should qualify.

"So Junkou saw a vision of this Shangri La and realized that *this* Sai and the one Shishou had in his sights were completely different?"

"I believe so. That would explain why he was so vehement in his denials. If so, however, things take an even odder turn."

"An odder turn?"

"Yes. If Junkou-sama saw a vision of Shangri La and realized that it and Sai were not the same place, then how could Shishou-sama also use the Kasho Kada

and come away so convinced? In that case, perhaps Shishou-sama never actually used the Kasho Kada?"

"That's—"

"Shishou-sama really was at his wit's end. He visited the East Palace on a daily basis to confer with the Taishi and his mother. He must have known he was sitting on a throne that was just about to break. If he didn't fix things and soon, his world was going to come apart. Besides, offered the Imperial Regalia, would it be possible for him *not* to use it?"

"I imagine it would be difficult."

"Wouldn't it, though? But supposing he *did* use the Kasho Kada, was terribly disheartened at the results or abruptly turned the government upside down—either would seem the likely outcome. Except he did neither. He became all the more convinced of the rightness of his course. According to Junkou-sama's recollection of events, that was about the time he presented the Kasho Kada to him."

"Did Shishou-sama use the Kasho Kada? And thus gain new confidence? That's not possible."

"No, it isn't. But didn't Sairin-sama say repeatedly that the Kingdom of Sai seen in those dreams should not be confused with the real Sai? That the utopia you are shown by the Kasho Kada and the Sai we know are worlds apart?"

Shuka nodded. It was intensely painful and distressing to imagine how deep such misunderstandings might go.

"But could it at least be possible once?"

Shuka turned her face to him.

"Can there be any doubt that Shishou-sama was the recipient of Divine Providence at the time of his coronation? If he'd been headed in the wrong direction from the start of the Imperial Court, could he be said to have protected and preserved throne? Could he be said to have even received the Mandate of Heaven in the first place?"

"I can't imagine the situation was ever as bad as that. We certainly made our

fair share of mistakes. At the same time, we had our successes as well, minor though they might be. But that may only be my desire to pat myself on the back."

"Of course. It stands to reason. But something has changed. The Kasho Kado changed something. It is said that the Kasho Kado reveals in dreams a vision of utopia. Perhaps that is our original assumptions have been mistaken."

"I don't understand your point."

"What if—what if the Kasho Kado shows a different vision to every person who uses it?"

Shuka's mouth opened in surprise, but she couldn't think of what to say.

"That would explain everything. The Taiho used the Kasho Kado. But the vision she saw was unique to herself. It would have nothing to do with the goals Shisou-sama had made for himself. Junkou-sama then used it, and saw something that the Taiho had not seen, something quite apart from what Sai was."

"Unbelievable. And then Shishou used it? And saw his own, unique utopia? And it coincided with *his* own visions of the future, and so reinforced his convictions."

Seiki nodded. "I don't think the utopia shown by the Kasho Kado is a true Shangri-La. You're not seeing the way the kingdom *ought* to be. The utopia Shishou saw was his vision of an ideal kingdom. The utopia the Taiho saw was her vision of an ideal kingdom. Reflecting a kirin's idealism, it would be a kingdom suffused with benevolence, where not one particle of malice or hate would be found. There's no way that such a place could have anything in common with the real Sai. That's what I think is going on. The Kasho Kado doesn't point you in the right direction. It embodies your ideals and shows them to you in a dream."

And so the two would always agree. Shuka could see how it all made sense. "But what would the purpose of such Imperial Regalia be?"

"I think it would serve the following purpose: most people really don't know what they really want or wish for."

"Oh, nonsense," Shuka said with a grim smile.

Seiki eyes narrowed. "Haven't you ever been at sea about something? Unsure whether one in the hand was really worth two in the bush?"

"Well—"

"For example, you returned from Sou to Sai. However, Princess Bun did offer you a position with the Sou government, which no doubt delighted you. Did you not have a strong urge to stay behind in Sou? But instead you returned to Sai. Why was that?"

"Because Eishuku persuasively argued that we should. Yes, the thought of staying in Sou crossed my mind. But as Eishuku said, we share some of the responsibility for bringing Sai to its current state. We raised the banner of righteousness. We lay the fault at King Fu's feet. We built the new Imperial Court alongside Shishou. So how could we cast all of that aside now?"

"So did you tell yourself you *could* not cast it all aside, or you *must* not?"

A confused look came to Shuka's face. It seemed a distinction without a difference.

"If you say that I remonstrated with myself that I *must* not, I would probably agree. I do not wish to abandon our righteous cause. I must not abandon it."

"By saying you *must* not, aren't you refusing to contemplate any other course of action? Because you *indeed* harbor doubts about doing so, you feel compelled to cast those doubts from your mind?"

"That's not it. I don't want to be some sort of fair-weather patriot. If I did, I'd live to regret it. I'd come to hate myself. I don't want to turn into a person like that."

"Meaning, you really have been of two minds about it?"

Shuka didn't know how to reply. She felt sullied. She wanted to run away from herself.

Seiki smiled. "Please, don't look at me like that. This isn't something you need to be ashamed of. You wouldn't be human if you didn't seriously consider abandoning this ship and starting all over again in Sou. Of course you would be of two minds about it. There's nothing admirable about the person who hews to

the right every time without a second thought. Those who feel the temptations of sin and resolve to distance themselves from them are far more admirable in my estimation."

"I suppose so."

"No need to suppose. But I believe people will always doubt their own true motives. We desire what we feel we should not do. We fret that there is something evil in even wanting it. All that worry is unpleasant, and we don't want to feel unpleasant, so practically from the start we wonder if what we really want is what we really want. Deep in our hearts our sense of conviction wavers. People are complicated things, and all those competing thoughts only muddy the picture. So we put a lid on it and fasten it down tightly and stifle our true desires."

"You're probably right."

"If so, then the Kasho Kada could be a tremendous help. It would unravel all the confusion and entanglements. Showing us the world we truly desire would put those doubts to rest. That's what I think the Kasho Kada is. It sifts through our ideals and removes the impurities."

Shuka nodded. Seiki smiled. But then his faced clouded over. "The problem is whether Eishuku-sama is aware of the Kasho Kada's true nature."

"I don't think so. He believes that its purpose has always been to show the way the kingdom objectively *ought* to be."

"Perhaps it's better that way." Seiki looked away. "If he understood how it truly should be used, then recommending it to Junkou-sama would be a dreadful error."

"A dreadful error," Shuka murmured, coming to the same conclusion, and feeling herself grow paler.

Presenting the Kasho Kada to Shishou would have been like pushing him off the cliff toward which he was already headed. Unaware that it did not present a picture of Shangri-la, but only clarified the dreamer's own hoped-for ideals, he would have come away more convinced of the rightness of his misaligned goals, and would have lost the last, best chance to correct his ways.

Part VII

S huka couldn't sleep. Lying in the bed, she heard Eishuku arrive home. She didn't get up to greet him and instead pretended to be asleep. She lacked the courage to look him in the eyes and ask if he knew what the Kasho Kada really was.

She was sure he didn't. But at the same time, she wouldn't be surprised if he did. The utopia that Sairin had seen had nothing to do with the real Sai. It didn't even come close. If that point alone had been clarified, then perhaps they wouldn't have trusted the Kasho Kada so thoroughly. Then maybe they would have realized how it really should be used.

Perhaps Eishuku *did* know and had recommended it to Junkou anyway. Perhaps he'd gone through Junkou to cover his own tracks. Perhaps Eishuku knew that the dreams Shishou was seeing weren't true, that the course he was pursuing could not be corrected. Knowing that he was heading toward that cliff full of conviction, Eishuku had resolved to push him off it.

But that couldn't be true. Eishuku and Shishou had always been friends, like brothers almost. If Shishou was straying from the Way, that would make Eishuku equally guilty of the sin. That's what she feared. Couldn't there be other explanations?

On the other hand, she couldn't help feeling that this would explain the source of Shishou's anger. Junkou had given him the Kasho Kada and Shishou had used it. Full of a renewed sense of conviction, he had ventured further down his mistaken path. Because of the Kasho Kada, Shishou had lost his last, best chance.

If he had then learned of the Kasho Kada's true purpose, and assumed that Junkou had given it to him deliberately, she could well imagine him storming into the North Palace, sword and Imperial Regalia in hand.

There had been rumors of Junkou's disloyalty floating around. Together with knowledge of the true purpose of the Kasho Kada, she could easily imagine Shishou jumping to the conclusion that Junkou had set out to deceive him.

When did those rumors start to circulate?

She had definitely heard them herself. When had they started? Who had started them? Somebody had been spreading them about. And if that somebody had whispered in Shishou's ear the truth about the Kasho Kada?

No. This is all quite impossible.

Eishuku was the person she had chosen as her life partner, the object of her unqualified respect and affection. That he could do such a horrifying thing—

Quite impossible.

Impossible that Eishuku would try to lead Shishou down to hell like that. He possessed more character than that. In fact, Eishuku had chosen to return to Sai. If his intent had been to deprive Shishou of the throne, he surely would not have returned to Sai where a death sentence for treason awaited him.

Surely not.

Chapter 20

Shuka fell into a restless sleep sometime around dawn. She was awoken by a commotion coming from the main hall. Seiki rushed in as she was getting out of bed to see what was going on.

"Ah, you're awake."

"What happened?"

"His Highness is missing."

"What?" she cried out. Her legs began to tremble. "Where to?"

"Nobody knows. The ministers are looking for him. They say his kijuu is gone as well. They're all quite at loose ends. Some think he went to see the Taiho."

"Why would he seek out her opinion *now*? Seiki, has Shishou said anything about Junkou?"

"The announcement was made during the Privy Council. Shishou-sama turned white as a ghost and collapsed. The room was quickly cleared. Shortly thereafter, he was nowhere to be found. Everybody is worried sick."

"You don't say," Shuka said under her breath. She clasped her hands together, "And Eishuku—?"

"He returned late last night. As usual, he sacked out in the study. And as could be expected, upon receiving this latest news, he got up and headed to Imperial Court to direct the search. He said not to wake you up, but I see that has become a moot instruction."

"Yes," Shuka answered. She went to the main hall and there awaited further reports.

But come nightfall, and still no more news was forthcoming. And then a clamor erupted outside the official residence.

"What in the world is going on out there?"

However much Shuka wanted to know, she didn't go and see for herself. She and Eishuku and Seiki were supposed to be under house arrest. Guards were posted at the gates. They turned a blind eye to Eishuku's repeated comings and goings, but that didn't mean she could just pop out for a look around.

Seiki nodded knowingly and left the main hall. He returned a few minutes later and reported that it was nothing serious. "I offered the guards a little bribe and made my own inquiries."

"Seiki—"

"At critical times such as this, I think we can ignore the letter of the law. Word of His Highness's absence is spreading and the ministers are becoming unraveled. Some are fleeing the Imperial Palace while they can. Others are grabbing hold of any valuables they can. Hence the ruckus. It comes down to a lot of to-ing and fro-ing."

"I see," Shuka muttered. She sank heavily into a chair. "Seiki, I understand that my worries may be completely misplaced, but do you think it's possible that Shishou has really fled the premises?"

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," Seiki answered crisply. "For the time being, we don't know anything for certain."

Chapter 21

Eishuku didn't come home that night. Morning came and went, as did the next evening, and still he hadn't returned. The cacophony outside the manor calmed down, replaced by a strained silence.

By the following morning, Shuka couldn't stand it any longer. "I'm going out," she said, getting to her feet.

She had to see Eishuku. Her body trembled with anxiety. Sitting around doing nothing only made it worse. Where had Shishou gone off to? It'd be fine if he'd slipped away by himself somewhere. But if that in fact wasn't the case—

Seiki sighed and retrieved a parcel from a nearby shelf. "You're under house arrest, so try not to stand out. I've borrowed some servant's garb for you to use."

Shuka nodded and took the clothing. After changing in her room, she went back to the main hall to find that Seiki had donned a similar outfit.

"Seiki, what's with that?"

"I shall be accompanying you, of course. Somebody's bound to raise a ruckus if you're caught sneaking around. If we are, I'll create a diversion while you make your way back here. I've greased a few palms, so the guards shouldn't be a problem."

"But Seiki—"

"The matter isn't up for debate. Let's be on our way. It's best we go under cover of night."

After a moment of hesitation, Shuka agreed. The guards looked the other way as they left the residence. In the hours before dawn, the Imperial Palace was still as death, with no sign of human life. But they kept their heads lowered in case they encountered anybody who knew them. They hurried down the paths Seiki

had chosen toward the Gaiden and the Imperial Court.

Alert to any prying eyes, they climbed the steps to the mezzanine. The guards were not posted at the doors. They stood a ways off. They knew Shuka well but did nothing to interfere.

"Shuka—" said the surprised Eishuku when she slipped into the room.

With him were the Shoushikou, the Daishiba of the Ministry of Summer, the Taisai and Shousai—both were also under house arrest—and the Daishikou, who had been sacked.

"His Highness?"

"No sign of him." Eishuku walked up to Shuka. "No matter what, the two of us can't be seen leaving the house whenever we feel like it."

"Eishuku, I need to talk to you about something."

Eishuku raised an eyebrow. He glanced over his shoulder at the other ministers and nodded. "This way." He gestured to Shuka and Seiki and headed to one of the smaller rooms on either side of the hall. Shuka entered first, Eishuku after her. Seiki remained outside and closed the door behind them.

"What's going on? Did something happen?"

Shuka wrung her hands together. "Eishuku, where is Shishou?"

"I don't know. His kijuu is gone. Some think he went to see the Taiho. We dispatched a carrier pigeon to Mount Samei requesting a return message if Shishou showed up. No word yet."

"You really don't know where Shishou has gone?"

"Why should I?" Eishuku replied, clearly surprised.

"Yes, you're right," Shuka said. "I need to ask you something. When did you first find out that Junkou might be antagonistic toward Shishou?"

Eishuku's expression hardened a bit. "Hard to say. Why?"

"It's really important. Try to remember."

Eishuku looked away. "I must have stumbled across it at some point. Chanced upon some undersecretaries talking about it or the like."

Not true, Shuka thought, the intuition she'd gained from interacting with people over a long period of time. "You need to find out how those rumors arose. No, this is something I need to do."

"What's this, all of a sudden? Yes, if you want to, then go ahead. But once Shishou turns up, we'll pretty much be out of options."

"Or perhaps you were the one who started the ball rolling?"

Eishuku faltered for a brief moment. "Nonsense," he said. He put on a brave face, but Shuka could tell he was rattled. She knew him well enough to sense things like that.

"How did you go about recommending to Junkou that he give the Kasho Kada to Shishou?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You recommended that he do so, right? I was with you at the time."

This time, the consternation clearly showed. "To be sure, I was the one who recommended it."

"Even knowing what the Kasho Kada actually did?"

"Shuka," he said, looking at her, and there was urgency in his eyes. "What are you trying to say? Why do I get the feeling you think I've done something wrong?"

"Why?" Shuka's eyes brimmed with tears. Eishuku had been at the bottom of everything. "Why drive Shishou toward the Shitsudou? Why lay those stumbling blocks before him?"

Eishuku turned away, and then resolutely looked back at her. "I didn't tell anybody to do anything wrong. Whatever stumbling blocks Shishou tripped over were the ones of his own making."

"But you were the one who pushed him in that direction!"

"You're free to believe that, but you can't prove it."

"I can't and I don't want to. I know what you've done. That is enough."

"None of this was my fault," Eishuku shot back. "It was always Shishou." He

grabbed her by the shoulders. "It all comes down to his pathetic kingship, you got that?"

"Eishuku—"

"Where did we ever go wrong? When did we ever stray from the Way? We did our level best, and things only got worse. Explain that."

"That's—"

"I've thought this through a hundred times. I don't think our ministerial colleagues have done anything wrong. They've carried out their duties with integrity, burning the midnight oil over and again. They've put their careers and lives on the line and kept their noses clean. And yet Sai falters. Why is that?"

"The same could be said of Shishou."

"Shishou is the king. He's not like us. We're responsible for our ministerial portfolios. Shishou is responsible for the kingdom. We have to believe that he's worthy of the Mandate of Heaven. Heaven made him king, but now that Mandate is all used up. He's no longer worthy of the calling. Can you think of any other explanation?"

Eishuku lowered his voice, "In fact, when it came to Junkou harboring any ill will toward Shishou, he swallowed the thing whole, without any kind of follow-up. Okay? I didn't make a stand on the issue one way or the other. I only hazarded that it *might* be possible. But Shishou didn't dismiss it out of hand. He didn't press Junkou personally. He swallowed it all whole. Shishou was the one who didn't believe Junkou, the one who doubted him. Who doubted *us*. I didn't mention treason. He concocted it on his own."

"That hardly constitutes an explanation, Eishuku."

"Why not? I didn't do anything to Junkou. *Shishou* was the one who got angry at him, who grabbed his sword and flew off in a rage. A single dream was all it took for him to close his eyes to the impending destruction of the kingdom and turn all that self-conviction into arrogance. Filled with paranoia, incapable of disciplining his own emotions, he let his passions drive him to mortal sin. That's the kind of person he's become. And that's why Heaven has abandoned him."

Shuka shook free of his grasp. "You just want to lay our failures at the feet of

another."

"I'm not the one who assaulted Junkou and the Taishi!"

"But you incited Shishou to commit a sin that would surely lead the kingdom to destruction. While saying that we bore responsibility for the way things have become, you were only excusing yourself. You excused yourself and blamed everything on Shishou. And in order to prove it to yourself, you led him to the edge of the cliff and pushed him off."

"I—"

"Yes, wouldn't it be so much better if *you* weren't one of those who'd lost his way? For example, instilling in Shishou suspicions about an insurrection, even if it meant being hauled off to gallows? Who would believe a compromised leader like Shishou? The sin would rest entirely on his head. Even if you ended up dying, you would be remembered as the wronged man."

"And so I would be."

"No," said Shuka, shaking her head. "Shishou should be no different than a brother to you. Your friend and your lord. You betrayed him. Far from saving him, you incited him to do the wrong thing. To salvage your own reputation, you forced all of our sins upon him. If that isn't a crime, then nothing is!"

Eishuku blanched.

"What could possibly be right and good about what you did?"

Eishuku was at a loss for words. Before he could summon up an answer, there came a fierce pounding on the door. "Pardon me!" exclaimed Seiki, pushing the door open.

"What's going on?"

"His Highness. He's been found," exclaimed Seiki, running toward them.

Behind Seiki came a flood of ministers and officials, their faces twisted in grief. "He has abdicated!"

Shuka froze on the spot. "What did you say?"

"The White Pheasant has sung. His Highness has stepped down from the

throne and abdicated."

"Shishou—" wailed Shuka.

Seiki caught hold of her to keep her from slumping to the floor. His hair and clothing unkempt from having run here, the Daisouhaku, head of the Ministry of Spring, buried his face in the sleeves of his robes.

"Along with his abdication, we have his parting words."

The White Pheasant sang out at the king's enthronement and abdication. If possible, it repeated the final words spoken by the king before he stepped down.

"His parting words?"

"Nothing can be gained by finding fault with others," Daisouhaku recited, and collapsed in tears.

Part VIII

he hall filled with cries of grief and lamentation. Seeing how dearly Shishou was still loved, Shuka felt a painful tightness in her chest.

"Shishou—" She heard Eishuku's subdued but dumbfounded voice behind her.

"Shishou didn't run away from his own mistakes," Shuka whispered. "He chose instead to make things right."

Eishuku groaned faintly. He brushed past her and left the Imperial Court. As if following his example, the other ministers came to their feet and departed as well. But unlike the rest of the ministers headed toward the large complex of government offices east of the Imperial Court—undoubtedly to spread the news of the king's demise—Eishuku alone turned south.

"Nothing can be gained by finding fault with others."

Shuka turned at the sound of Seiki's sad and painful voice. He smiled a crumpled smile and wiped his face with his sleeve. "Just the kind of thing I'd expect Shishou-sama to say."

"I wonder what was he trying to say exactly?"

"He said exactly what he said. Blaming others and tearing them down accomplishing nothing."

"But what did he mean by it? I've criticized and blamed him—"

Seiki shook his head. "No. I believe Shishou-sama was referring to himself. He likely wished the ministers to take his own fate as moral instruction."

"Shishou? I don't understand. Finding fault with whom?"

"With King Fu."

"With King Fu?"

"I'm certain that's what he meant. I recall my mother also saying something to

that effect. It was a long time ago, back during the days of Kouto. Shishou had raised the banner of Kouto and Eishuku-sama rushed to join them. I wanted to as well. I urged her to come with us to Yuunei and take part in the revolution. That was when she said something very similar to what Shisho-sama said."

"Shinshi-sama did?"

"She said that finding fault is easy, but doing so sets nothing right."

Chapter 23

Shinshi had said to Seiki, "I trust Shishou's good intentions, but I can't endorse the goals of Kouto and the like. And I told him the same thing."

"Why is that?" Seiki asked.

"I dislike this business of finding fault. I gave Shishou a piece of my mind. What he did with it after that was of his own choosing."

"I don't know what to say."

His foster mother smiled. "Don't overthink it."

"Well, ah, then please tell me. Why do you dislike about finding fault with others?"

"Because I am hardly qualified to do so. Oh, if criticism is what you want, I could dish it out from sun up to sundown. Still, I have my doubts about what Shishou is doing. Yes, it's easy to say that *that's* a different kettle of fish. But I'd be hard pressed to explain to you what the difference is."

"I don't get it."

"Seiki, what do you think of the state the kingdom is in? What do you think of our king?"

"I believe he has strayed from the Way. Things are in such an awful condition."

"And if the king and Taiho pass away, will you go on the Shouzan?"

Seiki blinked several times and then vigorously waved his hands. "Me? Perish the thought!"

"Why is that?"

"A person like me has no business trying to run the kingdom. That's a job better left to people like Shishou-sama and Eishuku-sama."

"Oh, so you criticize others for being unable to accomplish what you yourself are incapable of?"

Shinshi spoke in playful tones, but the flustered Seiki glanced nervously about.
"Well, um, ah—"

"So perhaps the only people who have the right to criticize His Highness are those truly more capable of ruling the kingdom than he."

"Yes, that may indeed be true."

"I think the same goes for Shishou and King Fu. I don't question that things are going badly in Sai. If it all was laid at the feet of His Highness, I wouldn't necessarily disagree. That is why voices of censure are raised against him. It's quite natural. Groups are formed and protests are launched with the hope that their complaints will reach His Highness's ears. That seems to be the strategy Shishou is following. But I have to wonder how any of this is different. I could easily criticize Shishou in that regard, but I would be at loss as well to suggest a better course. It is certainly true that the course of the king and the kingdom need to be corrected. I couldn't say how, only that the course Shishou is plotting is not the right one. That alone is probably the only area where Shishou deserves criticism, wouldn't you say?"

"I suppose so."

"True reform is a different creature than that. Perhaps true reform begins by pointing to the right course rather than illuminating the wrong one."

"But isn't Shishou speaking out because he perceives the correct course ahead of us?"

"He most certainly does. And I can only say that I believe him to be taking the wrong tack. Not what the correct tack is. If, after hearing that, his sense of conviction remains firm, well, we'll just have to take our best shot and see if things turn out the way Shishou believes."

"Take our best shot—that seems awfully cold of you, mother."

"You think so? But I can't say I know what's best. Shishou isn't necessary wrong, is he?"

"And if he is?"

"If he is, then Shishou possesses the character to correct his course. That I believe." Shinshi smiled. "I'm not saying that I *know* Shishou is doing the wrong thing. Only that I feel a certain unease. That is enough to prevent me from becoming a supporter. But since I cannot offer a firm alternative as to the correct course of action, I don't feel I am qualified to be his critic. So you as well may do as you please. If you believe that Shishou is doing the right thing, then you should give him your full support."

Seiki had decided that Shishou was right and Shinshi was wrong. When he looked up at Shinshi with a troubled look on his face, Shinshi smiled. "You needn't worry on my account. If I am wrong and Shishou is right, and the kingdom prospers because of it, then that is the only thing that matters."

Chapter 24

Seiki said to Shuka, "Until now, I really didn't understand what my mother was talking about. Laying blame is easy. Anybody can find fault. But if that criticism doesn't point to a workable solution, then nothing good will come of it. Reform engenders something. Criticism engenders nothing."

"I don't know, Seiki."

Seiki smiled sadly. "Didn't you say so yourself, Shuka? In the end, we weren't able to do anything. Since the time of King Fu, we haven't taken a single step forward."

"I don't like admitting it, but that is the truth."

"And why is that?"

"If I understood that—"

"What about the simplest explanation? We didn't have the ability to lead the kingdom forward."

Shuka paled. She said, an uncharacteristic degree of agitation in her voice, "What—what's that supposed to me? We didn't have the ability? Shishou? Us?"

Seiki let out a small sigh. "There's nothing wrong with not having the ability to do something. There's no end to what I'm incapable of doing. I can't swing a sword to save my life. We can't all be good at everything, though we can all be good at something."

"Are you saying that running the Imperial Court is something we weren't good at? If that was the case, then why did Shishou receive the Mandate of Heaven?"

"Well, I'm not God, so I don't know. Perhaps Tentei was taking Shishou's idealism and earnestness into consideration."

"So our intentions were good but we didn't have what it took to carry it off."

"Our talents weren't the right fit for the job."

"It is not a good thing that people rise to power who are unfit to hold the reins of power. There's nothing wrong with being unqualified, except when it comes to the king and the government. An unqualified king is a contradiction of terms!"

"Which is why—" Seiki started to say. He didn't finish the sentence and bowed his head instead.

That was when it occurred to Shuka. *An unqualified king was a contradiction of terms.* A king unfit to govern could not be permitted to hold the office.

"And so Shishou lost the Mandate of Heaven." Shuka sank to the ground in dumbfounded amazement.

"Um—" she heard Seiki softly say. "You know, I'm basing this on what Shishou-sama said in his parting words. It is possible that he misunderstood something at a very basic level."

"A very basic level?"

"That nothing is creating by finding fault. Shishou-sama may have misunderstood that from the very beginning, and now becoming aware of its truth, he left those parting words with us."

"I don't know," said Shuka, shaking her head.

Seiki sat down in front of her and smiled. "Ruling a kingdom means building a government. Shishou-sama should have devoted his energies to accomplishing that goal. What kind of government he should establish and how he should govern it. What shape and form the kingdom ought to take. But I have to wonder if Shishou-sama ever gave any of that any consideration."

"That's ridiculous! Since Shishou founded Kouto—"

Seiki nodded. "He was always talking about how the kingdom *ought* to be. It was mesmerizing every time I heard him speak. But think about how things have turned out. Were those really Shishou's ideal? Oh, he had ideals, but perhaps they were nothing more than King Fu's ideals repackaged."

Shuka gaped at him.

"Taxes under King Fu were heavy. So Shishou said they should be lightened.

And when he did so, the Imperial Treasury ran short of funds. There wasn't enough money left to build a single levee. Famines would strike, but nothing would be laid up in store. Nothing was taken from the people, and nothing demanded of them."

"Yes, well—"

"It never appeared to me that Shishou-sama gave any thought to what taxes were for, why it was wrong for them to be heavy, and why it was good for them to be light. Simply that whatever King Fu had levied, he would abate. He never thought the process through to the ultimate causes and effects."

Responses arose in Shuka's mind, but she didn't know how to articulate them.

"I think it's just as my mother said. It's easy to criticize others. Especially those of us so proud of our lofty ideals. It is so very easy. But did we have what it took to put those ideals into action? I suspect we always lacked the ability to pluck those ideals out of the air and painstakingly fashion them into something solid and real. Observing King Fu's heavy hand and simply saying it should be lighter was the height of naiveté."

Seiki sighed. "Yes, lighter taxes are better. That's an ideal we can always strive for. But the people didn't profit in the slightest. They suffered when the taxes were heavy. They suffered when the taxes were light. When that happens, policies must be examined and analyzed. Conclusions must be drawn and responses drafted. But we simply skimmed the surface, and only barely."

Shuka at length grasped the point of Seiki's argument. Shinshi had instructed Shishou over and over. The proper rate of taxation can only be determined by looking closely at how the people actually live and the real conditions they face.

When asked *how much*, she refused to answer. Because she couldn't point at a number and say what the proper tax rate was. *Try it and see what happens*, was her only proposal, which Shishou flatly rejected. The taxes the people were laboring under were too heavy already, and they should only go down. That was his steadfast position.

"I think Shishou-sama got it into his head that there was one and only one ideal kingdom. It lay at the end of that golden road, and he would accept no other. To start experimenting *now* was out of the question. His allegiances to the

Shangri-la he saw in the Kasho Kada were so strong that there could be no compromises. Except that these convictions had arisen out of his criticisms of King Fu and then fostered in his dreams."

"Yes, that's it," Shuka said to herself.

The Imperial Court was crumbling before their very eyes, and they had been content to criticize King Fu. Shuka had protested King Fu's heavy taxes along with the rest of them. Her protests were not the product of careful thought, but the result of her righteous indignation at what the people in front of her were suffering. They cried out that the taxes were too heavy and should be reduced. But strong convictions alone offered no solutions when the taxes were lightened and the lot of the people didn't improve.

The right course of action had always seemed self-evident. Because King Fu had strayed from the Way, they simply assumed that everything he did must have been wrong. They'd burned the midnight oil on so many occasions picking apart everything King Fu did and talking about how things ought to be and dreaming of paradise.

Their criticisms of King Fu had fertilized the seeds of those dreams. Every mistake the government made and every spot of corruption that came to light nurtured them and made them more concrete in their minds. If King Fu did it, then it must be undone. Reduce the world to such a simple equation and discovering what was right and what was wrong became a piece of cake.

Over twenty years they had built upon a foundation fashioned from cheap convictions, and had succeeded in creating an Imperial Court even more brittle than King Fu's.

"We really were incompetent."

They had never understood what in the world a "kingdom" actually was. They didn't have the knowledge or direction required to rule one, while all the time believing they did. They thought that criticizing King Fu had somehow endowed them with the ability to run the government better than he had.

Shuka lay sprawled on the floor, her hand pressed against her chest. She heard light footsteps approaching. She sat up to see an ashen-faced Shinshi rushing into the hall.

"Shuka—Seiki— They say Shishou has passed away—"

Shuka nodded. "The song of the White Pheasant was heard. He left a last testament to accompany his abdication. *Nothing can be gained by finding fault with others.*"

The stark surprise showed on Shinshi's face. She hung her head and buried her face in her hands. "So he amended his ways," she groaned. "A fine boy. Yes, a fine boy."

From the look on her face and the tone of her voice, it was clear that she had seen through everything from the beginning. She had taught Seiki that criticism was not the same as reform. She had realized the magnitude of Shishou's errors all along. That was why she hadn't supported Kouto in the first place.

Shuka said to her, "You knew that we lacked the qualifications to run the Imperial Court. Since it was so easy to criticize King Fu, we assumed we knew everything he didn't. Parading our foolishness about must have been a constant irritation to you."

Shinshi knelt down next to Shuka. "Oh, I wouldn't go that far."

"But—" said Shuka, choking down the cry of grief rising in her throat. Her own shameful state was infuriating. Being proven so incompetent was bad enough. Realizing how blind she had been to her own abilities made it all the worse.

"Tormenting yourself so will profit you little, Shuka. Do you understand now what you should have done then?"

"We shouldn't have had the Imperial Court entrusted to us. It should have been given to somebody qualified."

"And who would that be? Doesn't a kingdom with an empty throne still need a ruler and ministers and officials? And the faster they are installed the better?"

"That is—"

Shinshi clasped Shuka's hand. "Criticizing yourself is ultimately as productive as criticizing others. Remember Shishou's parting words. Salting the earth only produces ground where nothing else will grow."

"But—" Shuka's composure dissolved into tears. The extent of her own

shortcomings was painful. The extent of her own ignorance was worse. She didn't know what to do with herself, or how to apologize to the people.

"I was a member of the Imperial Court as well. And I was as out to sea and the rest of you. I didn't have the slightest idea what to do about taxes or the organization of the bureaucracy. But even knowing that I knew nothing about government, I accepted the post of Taifu. But no matter the king, won't that always be the case at the beginning of a dynasty?"

Shuka lifted her head and blinked.

"I've heard that the Royal Sou was once an innkeeper in the provinces. Do you think he had any idea about what running a government entailed? I don't think any of us need to be ashamed of our ignorance. What we should be ashamed off—what we should regret—was only that we did not hold fast to our convictions."

"We—"

"But weren't you haunted by doubts? That you really didn't know what you were doing? That you were making a mistake? If so, you can correct that. As did Shishou."

"Shinshi-sama—"

"Shishou was the king. He had only two means of correcting his errors: reflect on his inadequacies and ignorance and correct his ways, or decide that he was not qualified for the job and step down. Shishou chose the latter. My personal feelings tell me that it would have been better if he could have reformed his ways instead. But that he chose the latter also tells me that he still had it in him to remain true to the Way. He knew he would never have allowed a king like himself to remain on the throne."

"Because he lacked the ability—?"

"Because he raised his sword against his father and brother."

Shuka nodded. She groaned to herself and covered her face with her hands.
"You knew?"

"The situation became clear after I gave it a bit of thought. As well as who had

pushed Shishou in that direction."

Shuka caught her breath, flashing Shinshi a look. Shinshi said, "I'm sure he felt driven into a corner, but what Eishuku did is unforgiveable. I feel for him as a mother and blame myself for not bringing it to a stop before it got this far."

"Shinshi-sama—"

"And so we can only pray that he finds it in himself to do the right thing, that henceforth and forever he will not add to the weight of his sins and shame, nor will ever again deviate from the straight and narrow to which he clung so hard."

Grasping the meaning of Shinshi's words, Shuka let out an anguished scream. "No! He wouldn't!"

Eishuku had left the Imperial Court and had headed due south. By himself. Shuka scrambled to her feet, but Shinshi seized her by the arm. "Get a hold of yourself. Don't lose sight of the people who truly deserve your sympathy. The fate of the people still rest upon our shoulders. The people who have just lost their king."

Tears welled up in Shinshi's eyes. But her aura of resoluteness was even stronger. "Shishou left Sai with its Taiho. The throne will not remain empty for long. At the very end, Shishou did not forget the burden he carried. If we pity Shishou, then we can't allow ourselves to forget that. Grieve for Shishou and grieve for Eishuku. But we now bear the weight of their sins and must atone on their behalf."

Shinshi turned to Seiki. "And you, Seiki. You can no longer be content to serve as Shuka's valet, dodging all other duties and responsibilities. The time for such selfishness is over."

"Yes," Seiki replied meekly, with a curt bow. "Your wish is my command, Kouko."

Shinshi had been the mother in law to this "whirlwind king," as well as his teacher and biggest influence. Her bearing and golden countenance resembled that of a kirin, and so was referred to by a certain contingent in the Imperial Court as *Kouko*, "the golden mother-in-law."

Shinshi answered with a firm nod. She looked at Shuka and then as if the

strength had gone out of her legs, suddenly clung to her and began to weep. Shuka caught her to keep her from falling down. Grasping the collar of Shinshi's robes, closing her ears against her cries, she heard hurried steps approaching.

"Shuka-sama, Shinshi-sama!" the Shousai cried out.

They didn't have to ask what he was coming to tell them. It would surely be news of another death. Shuka believed in her husband.

Seiki silently got to his feet and quickly left the hall, closing the doors behind him.

Kizan

The city spread out from the banks of a brimming blue lake. The mirror-like surface of the water gleamed with reflections of the white stone facades, and rising up behind them, the soaring grey peaks of the Ryou'un Mountain.

As soon as they surmounted the last of the mountain passes, travelers climbing the roads leading to the city were presented with the sight—the mountains surrounded by broad, green fields, the sparkling lake, the peaks jutting through the clouds, and at the white city at the mountain's base.

"What a view!" The man wiped the sweat from his brow and turned to a fellow traveler, who had stopped beside him. "Shisou certainly is a beautiful city!"

They paused at the top of the pass on a small stone outcropping overlooking the scene. The man's excited proclamation prompted an amused look from the other traveler.

Noting that he'd made himself the center of attention, the man flashed a crooked grin. "You've been walking ahead of me the whole way. Despite such a splendid kijuu, dutifully hiking up this mountain road seemed a strange exercise. But it certainly was the right decision."

"Indeed," answered the traveler with a bright smile. He petted the tiger-like beast. He looked to be in his early twenties. And befitting the valuable kijuu accompanying him, he was finely attired.

"Speaking of which, are you a citizen of Shisou?"

"No."

The man nodded and again blotted his forehead. The climb had left him lightheaded and the sweat beading up like tiny pearls. Though the sunlight pouring down was as clear and strong as the early summer might bring, a refreshing wind blew through the pass.

He loosened the collar of his tunic to direct the cool breeze through his clothing. After taking a deep breath, he again remarked on what a fine place this was, and began his descent.

The traveler with the kijuu watched him depart. He again took in the view from the ridge. Then he too picked up the reins and started down the road. The white city in the distance was the capital of the Kingdom of Ryuu. At the top of the white mountain was the home of the Royal Ryuu, Fun'ka Palace. It looked from this vantage like a distant forest shrouded in the clouds.

The path lazily wound down the mountain and cut across the green fields. Hamlets dotted the fields. They eventually arrived at the white barrier wall. Inside the barrier wall were the white streets of the city. The city itself seemed to have been fashioned entirely from a quarry of gray-tinged white stone.

There were few forests in the vicinity of Shisou. And rather than carting lumber great distances, carving away at the Ryou'un Mountain—that looked like it was holding up the heavens—was a much shorter cut. Boring into its flanks, carving notches in its sides, the white city seemed an extension of the mountain itself. The unique black timbers that held up the roofs wood came from the central region of Ryuu. The tiles as well were dark as mahogany.

It was a handsome, black and white city. The city's citizens trod the white cobblestones dressed in their brilliant and variegated colors.

The traveler passed through the Horse Gate and entered the city. He paused to observe the hustle and bustle of traffic before the gate. The people passing back and forth seemed to be walking with light steps, and were generally in a pleasant mood. Like they hadn't a worry in the world.

He drew his brows together. "I don't like this."

"What's that?"

The sudden voice behind him caused him to spin around. He blinked with recognition and smiled broadly.

"Meeting you here, of all places."

"Exactly the kind of place I'd expect to meet you. Long time, no see, Rikou."

Rikou smiled despite himself. It definitely had been a long time since they had last met. A good thirty years. "I don't believe it, Fuukan. Wasting your time just loitering about."

"Same as you."

"How long have you been here?"

"Only two days," Fuukan answered. He pointed west. "I've got a room in an inn down the street. The food's terrible but they've got decent stables."

"Well then, lead the way."

With a rare kijuu in tow, choosing the right inn was a necessity, and finding one with stables and good security could take a fair amount of time. Rikou was grateful that Fuukan had picked him out in the crowd.

How had they first run into each other? It was an old story by now. He couldn't even be sure of where it was. He couldn't remember the exact details of what had led them to cross paths or part ways. At first, he'd probably thought him a strange chap, and doubted they'd ever meet again.

But time had passed and they'd met again in a different kingdom. It became clear there was no way he could be some sort of self-styled vagabond. Sixty years had passed in the meantime. The average person would have died or would have aged past recognition.

Since then, they'd met here and there. The traveler gained a sense about who he was, though without inquiring too deeply. He could figure it out without getting into a cross-examination—a man who like Rikou had spent a very long time on the road.

The place they always seemed to meet was *that* kind of place. Like the capital of a kingdom beginning to show its age. Rikou had heard rumors that things were getting chancy in Ryuu. The current dynasty was going on a hundred and twenty years. It was starting to falter. He'd come to check it out in person, and here they'd met again.

"So what exactly don't you like about the place?" asked Fuukan over his shoulder, a step ahead of him.

"The way people appear in this city."

The kingdom was heading downhill but its citizens were unperturbed. Long experience had taught Rikou that this was the surest proof of an impending disaster.

People always liked to laugh about how their kingdom was headed for wrack and ruin. While expressing some sense of unease, they'd badmouth the king and the government with smiles on their faces. When things got really dire, it was all gloom and doom.

Yet when society teetered right on the edge of collapse, they'd grow restless and strangely optimistic. In the blink of an eye, they'd throw themselves into empty pleasures, uprooted and swept along by their emotions. At some point, this diseased optimism would shatter and the kingdom would collapse in one fell swoop.

The facts on the ground were difficult for other kingdoms to judge from afar. It was clear when law and order completely broke down in a kingdom. But at the beginning of the breakdown, as the strains and distortions compounded beneath the surface, they were not so apparent to outside eyes.

But they were to the people living there. And what they couldn't see they could sense. Taking a personal look at the citizenry, Rikou had learned, told him a lot about the condition of the kingdom. Rumors of precarious times had leaked to other kingdoms, but the citizens of the capital were in a good mood. An omen of danger ahead.

"The time for reform is when the people are down in the dumps," Rikou said with a sigh.

Fuukan answered under his breath, "They're past that stage. There's no stopping it no matter what they do. Ah, here we are."

He indicated an inn. At first glance, it seemed a rather ostentatious place. The white stone walls carved with countless, brightly-colored base relief ornamentation. Even though the time was barely past noon, the sound of intoxicated merriment could be heard echoing over the surrounding walls.

Rikou rented a room and arranged his personal belongings.

"Is Ryuu really in such dire straits?" Fuukan inquired behind him. Apparently he had nothing better to do. He opened the window. The lively sounds of the throngs flowed in.

"Hard to tell. There are no reports of the people being oppressed. No rumors of the Imperial Court falling into extravagance and immorality. But it seems the wheels are coming off in the provinces. The further away from the capital, the worse off everybody is."

"That's it?"

"For the time being," Rikou muttered, throwing himself into the nearest chair. That was indeed what it came down to.

On the surface, nothing was wrong. But the foundations were full of fissures. Hence the sense of unease. That sense of unease translated into rumors filled with uncertainty. The outsider would not see the source of the anxiety. That was why, when the downfall came, it would seem to come all at once and out of nowhere.

"A flash in the pan," Rikou said to himself.

Fuukan sat down on the divan and stretching out his legs. "Just the kind of thing one would expect a man of Sou to say. He counts a hundred and twenty years as a mere flash in the pan."

"Yeah, I guess so," Rikou laughed.

Rikou hailed from the Kingdom of Sou in the southern reaches of the world. The Royal Sou had reigned now for six hundred years. In eighty more years, the Sou Dynasty would become the longest in history, the longest of all the Twelve Kingdoms. The northeast Kingdom of En was only a century behind.

"One way or another, I got the impression Ryuu could keep it together longer."

"What's that?"

The name of the Royal Ryuu was Jo Rohou. Rikou didn't know the fine details of how he'd been chosen to be king. Sou and Ryuu were at opposite ends of the earth. News from Ryuu came to Sou only in drips and drabs.

Neither did visiting the kingdom in person necessarily make him privy to the

inner workings of the Imperial Palace. In many kingdoms, the ruler's given name wasn't even disclosed. Rikou only knew because he circulated at the proper levels of society to know such things.

It wasn't because Rohou had worked in the upper echelons of the Imperial government. Nor had he traveled on the Shouzan, to Mt. Houzan in the center of the universe for an audience with the kirin. Nor had he been plucked from the farming or merchant classes.

His ascension simply hadn't been the kind of dramatic affair people made a big fuss about.

Twenty years had passed between the end of the previous dynasty and Rohou's coronation. Ryuuki had taken his time choosing the new king. Usually after the previous kirin had died, the new fruit appeared at once, and within the year the kirin was born.

Several years would pass before the kirin could hear the Word of Heaven and chose a new king. But the sooner the better, and the new ruler would be enthroned within that span of time.

While there wasn't necessarily any connection between the years leading up to a king's coronation and the competence of the king, Rohou's past was vague at best, and the impression he made was mostly that of not making much of an impression.

Perhaps because of that, his accession didn't create much of a stir. As time passed, his fame increased. By now, the Kingdom of Ryuu was renown as a kingdom of law and order. And yet it was hitting the skids. To Rikou, this was an entirely unexpected turn of events.

When he said as much, Fuukan tilted his head doubtfully. "Unlike you, I'm surprised the dynasty lasted this long. When Rohou acceded to the throne, he didn't strike anybody as king material. He'd been a county supervisor and then a governor in the provinces. The locals thought well of him, but not so much that word of his accomplishments ever made it to the capital. Nothing much to set him apart from the next guy."

Fuukan knew Rohou's given name as well, evidence that he moved in the same circles as Rikou.

"Well, you'd expect a man from En to know about such things. You're next door neighbors, after all?"

"I guess so. I swung by shortly after the coronation. A middling choice, was my impression. Like a ship that looked nice sailing out of port but would sink during the first real gale."

"The first real gale," Rikou echoed.

The reign of a king had no time limit. As long as he followed the Way and ruled according to the Will of Heaven, his dynasty would continue. But keeping the Imperial Court in working order was no easy task.

What made the whole thing surprising to Rikou was that Heaven started out by bestowing its Mandate on such a person—an enlightened monarch—with the capabilities and qualifications to govern a kingdom. The kirin listened to the Word of Heaven and chose its Lord and the new King.

And yet the dynasties were so short-lived. Sou at six centuries and En at five were the exceptions. After them was the Western Kingdom of Han, closing in on three centuries. And then Kyou at a mere ninety years.

Curiously enough, having witnessed the six hundred years of an Imperial Court, Rikou had concluded that there were certain turning points over the rise and fall of a dynasty. The first came at the ten-year mark. Successfully crossing it usually meant another thirty to fifty years of comfortable rule.

Then came the second, and this one was a big one. It coincided with the king's natural lifespan.

Upon his coronation, a king was entered upon the Registry of the Gods, after which he did not age or die. A king who had acceded to the throne in his thirties would, after another thirty or so years, had he not been listed on the Registry of the Gods, be closing in on his three-score-and-ten.

This rekindled sense of his own "mortality" could prove dangerous. Even though the word "lifespan" meant nothing to them, the king and the ministers who served him couldn't help but keep track of their "real" age: the ages at which it was not strange for them to be still alive, and the ages at which, by rights, they would have otherwise lived a "full life."

And at the same time, in the world below, all the people they used to know were disappearing one by one.

In fact, this wasn't something they witnessed personally. Being listed in the Registry of Wizards or the Registry of the Gods inevitably broke their relationships with people in the world below. Climbing above the Sea of Clouds, their birthplace became just another one of the kingdom cities. "News from home" rarely reached them, and nobody came to visit.

And yet it was impossible not to imagine their passing and imagine that he wouldn't be long for the world either. He couldn't escape the thought that he alone had been left behind to live a life whose ending he could not fathom.

A life's worth of time had been exhausted, and what did he have to show for it? Some looked backward and were overcome by the meaningless of it all. Others looked forward and were overcome by a terror of the unknown.

The ministers listed upon the Registry of Wizards faced these same turning points, and sudden resignations were hardly unexpected. But a king couldn't just walk away from it all and end his life in the face of some vague sense of futility and fear. And so Heaven's hand would be forced instead, and the chaos unleashed.

Such a king created the very inevitability he resigned himself to. Rikou and others identified it as a "passive resignation."

In any case, once he had made it past that point in time when he should have no time left, he would catch his second wind. Having crossed over that mountain, a dynasty could expect a long life ahead of it, and wouldn't face its next gauntlet until the three century mark.

Rikou didn't know why this milepost was so perilous, but when a kingdom collapsed it always seemed particularly ugly. Respected and enlightened monarchs transformed into tyrants overnight. The people were slaughtered and the land laid waste.

"They got over the mountain and made it to the one hundred and twenty mark. Split the difference, more or less."

"Split the difference." Fuukan smiled. "I see. Many kings who cross that

mountain make it to three hundred. But just as many don't."

"True enough."

Except that Rikou had been in Ryuu at the time of that first high hurdle. He'd wandered around and seen for himself how well that hurdle could be surmounted. The feeling he got at the time was quite positive. Things were looking up.

There were definitely a good many kingdoms that made it through that gauntlet and yet collapsed before making it to the three-hundred mark. More made it than didn't, but made it through the storm with sails torn and taking on water, on the verge of abandoning ship.

Rikou hadn't seen any signs of that in Ryuu. A sound hull, clear skies and calm seas.

When he explained this, Fuukan raised an eyebrow and scowled a bit. "Yeah, I thought the same thing. I recall thinking that Ryuu was something of an enigma."

"An enigma?"

"It had taken on a form that wasn't obvious at first glance. I talked about that first real gale, but the real typhoon comes at a dynasty's inauguration. The first ten years of so after the coronation of a new king determined the structure of the new Imperial Court. It seemed to me that Rohou messed that up."

"If they can't get it right out of the blocks, even with a bit of improvising here and there, the dynasty won't last long." Rikou glanced at Fuukan and grinned. "As far as that goes, once in a while you see an incoherent monster that doesn't know its head from its tail and lasts only a generation or two."

Fuukan laughed. Rikou added with a thin smile, "Normally, a kingdom that begins in failure won't last a hundred twenty years."

"You wouldn't think so. But Rohou held it together. More than that, when the first big test arrived, Ryuu did a complete about-face. Most striking was the legal system. It was so constructed so soundly that I could imagine the king turning his throne into a bed and the kingdom would carry on regardless."

"True, true. I had to believe this was one capable man. Anybody who lays down

that firm a foundation at that stage should make it to three hundred."

"That big of a change always struck me as odd. A kingdom used to traveling in a rut is likely to topple over when the king jerks the reins in a different direction. That was the first time I'd seen the opposite."

"Reminds me of En," said Rikou. "I didn't think En was going to last its first decade. But things turned around with that first big hurdle." He folded his arms. "If Rohou was following suit, then Ryuu wouldn't be in such dire straits. I haven't seen anything like this before."

En and Sou alone had passed the three-hundred mark. That's how fragile the other kingdoms were. Three-quarters didn't make it through the first gauntlet. A dynasty survived several decades and then died. So Rikou had seen many a dynasty rise and fall.

"I never get used to the way they fail," Fuukan muttered.

Rikou cocked his head to the side. "Never get used to it?"

"I don't understand why Ryuu has begun to fail now either. Or rather, I don't understand what's happened, except that, to put it bluntly, Rohou seems to have reversed course yet again."

"Now?"

"Now. Not only has Rohou become oblivious to the fact that the laws he promulgated are being ignored and trampled upon, but he is acting in a manner that undermines the very edifice he constructed."

"He's undermining it?"

Fuukan nodded. "The law requires three components to work together. Simply forbidding something by statute is not enough."

"An organization is needed to ensure that that prohibitions are applied where intended and faithfully carried out. Else the law is simply an ornament. And the third?"

"The law must affirm as well. Laws designed to outlaw tyranny and the corrupt must respect the incorrupt and make the most of their contributions. The one will not work without the other."

"I see."

"Ryuu did this remarkably well. But Rohou has set to wrecking it. He changes one and leaves another alone. Nothing is done in a consistent manner. That is how discord is born."

"And that is very strange." Rikou pondered this and exclaimed, "Perhaps Rohou is no longer sitting on the throne."

"No longer occupying the throne?"

Rikou nodded. "Maybe he just got tired of the whole thing. Gave up the reins of power."

"I could believe it," said Fuukan. He got to his feet and went to the window. The rays of the early summer sun were beginning to slant across the city. The cacophony from streets below was growing louder.

Voices of drunken merriment like a pack of baying hounds unleashed. Flirtatious, cooing voices like musical instruments played wildly out of key. As if the entire city had turned into one giant block party.

"Rohou set up a very sound system. So even if he threw away his authority, it should have lasted this long. The real chaos will start to set in after this. But Rohou would have abandoned the fight a long time ago. So much so that Heaven withdrew its favor."

Rikou drew his brows together. "What do you mean by that?"

"Youma have appeared along the Kyokai coast."

Rikou hadn't expected this development. It could only mean that the end of the dynasty was on the horizon. And yet the chaos remained at a low enough level that it was only apparent to an outsider like Rikou.

"Snow piling up in areas where snow is ordinarily scarce, and the like. Heaven is not happy. The chaos is buffeting the countryside before striking at the seat of power. It's usually the other way around."

"It's progressed that far without revealing itself?"

"So it seems. En has begun posting troops along the border," said Fuukan, as if discussing a situations removed far from them.

Rikou glanced at him and nodded. "In any case, Ryuu hasn't got long to go." The Imperial Court was in a very brittle state.

The commotion drifting in through the window grated painfully in his ears. Invisible fissures were opening in the earth beneath their feet. The gates of hell were opening. Nobody could stop them now.

When a king strayed from the Way, the kirin who chose him grew ill. When that happened, it became clear to all what was going on, no matter who the king was. All a monarch had to do for the kirin to recover and the kingdom to catch a second wind was return to the Way. And yet Rikou had rarely seen that actually happen. There were kings aware of how far they had fallen. But examples of a king repenting and reforming the kingdom were few and far between.

Once that downward slide had begun, a kingdom's fate quickly became inevitable, and the king's tragic efforts a drop in the ocean.

"What's that?" said Fuukan from the window, waking from his reverie. "You that down about Ryuu falling short of your expectations?"

"The meeting of my expectations is neither here nor there." Rikou sighed. "But it is a disappointment. The dynasty had such a promise of greatness."

Ryuu had that spark of greatness in her. And yet in a mere—at least what to Rikou was a "mere"—one hundred and twenty years, Ryuu had failed.

"When you stop to think about it, dynasties like that never lack the ability to disintegrate overnight."

"Now you're just stating the obvious. The good man from Sou has no doubt seen them come and go by the gross."

Rikou laughed. "And so this man of Sou has. I guess a young colt like yourself wouldn't understand." When Fuukan quizzically hiked up an eyebrow, he added, "Sou being the longest-lived of all the Twelve Kingdoms."

"Oh, is that it?" Fuukan answered with a wry smile. He turned and looked out the window.

"That's what it comes down to. A man of En couldn't grasp this sense of oppressiveness. Even only a hundred years, you have least have one example

standing before you."

But Sou had none to follow. And after eighty more years, even the legends would be left behind. No other dynasty had lasted that long.

"I think about it every time a dynasty comes to an end. I stand beside the deathbed and can't keep the thoughts from my mind: no dynasty lasts forever."

And Sou and En were unlikely to prove the exception to that rule.

"When I think about it in those terms, it makes me catch my breath. No dynasty lasts forever. An immortal dynasty is impossible. And if all dynasties must surely die, then Sou must surely die."

"Nothing lasts forever," said Fuukan, still looking out the window.

"Nope," Rikou chuckled. "No matter how I look at it, that's what it comes down to. And still I can't imagine the end of Sou."

"Naturally. Nobody can imagine his own death."

"You sure? I think I could picture it. Getting drawn into some meaningless quarrel and losing my head in the process, or getting turned into youma food during one of my wanderings."

Fuukan laughed and turned around. "Imagining the variously *possibilities* and imaging the moment itself are not the same thing."

"You could have a point." For a moment he let his thoughts spin. "You're right. It's a non-starter. Nothing comes to mind."

It was difficult for Rikou to imagine the conditions that would cause the Royal Sou to stray from the way. But insurrections could arise no matter who the king was. Thinking along those lines, he imagined the faces of the retainers in his mind's eye. Among all the princes of the kingdom, he couldn't connect any of them with the word "treason."

"But when it comes to En," he muttered, "I can well imagine it."

"Oh?" said Fuukan curiously.

Rikou smiled. "I have no problem imagining that. Taking the Royal En's temperament into consideration, I don't think it'd ever end with him straying

from the Way. There is some question as to what understanding he has of the road ahead. But the law has been laid down, and he's not going to *accidentally* drive the cart into the ditch. No matter what two-bit criminals try to take him on, he's not the type to go quietly. En will only fail when the Royal En decides to let it."

"I see."

"And you can count on him doing it just for the hell of it. No big reason. One day, out of the blue, with no malice aforethought. Considering how persistent the man can be, though, once having resolved himself, I doubt that he would immediately spring into action. Yes, he'd make a wager."

"A wager?" Fuukan inquired with a dubious look.

"Exactly what the word means. A bet with Heaven. For example, that you'll run into a certain person you rarely see a hundred times. Every time fate smiles upon you and you meet, you win. Every time you don't, you chalk one up for Heaven."

"Oh, that kind of bet." Fuukan laughed.

"Whatever he settled on, he'd do it whole hog. En would be wiped off the map. The ministers, the people, the Taiho. The capital and the cities. En would be turned into a pretty but empty field."

"Killing the Taiho would be as good as slitting his own throat."

"But not right away. He'd kill the Taiho and declare war on Heaven. Whether Heaven would take him out before he'd razed the land and salted the earth—that's the kind of wager he'd love to make."

"And who do you think would win that one?"

"Push come to shove, I think he could pull it off. But it'd prove so unbearable that in the end he'd leave behind a few scattered hamlets and then die, all the while laughing at himself. How's that?"

"Not bad." Fuukan smiled. "And when it comes to Sou, it's not beyond my imagination."

"Eh?"

"The vagabond prince gets tired of clinging to the world as it is, and

assassinated the Royal Sou."

Rikou blinked, and then burst out laughing. "Low blow. And I have a feeling it just might be possible."

Fuukan laughed loudly, and then turned his gaze out the window. "Flights of fancy rarely touch down on solid ground."

Would it were so, Rikou thought, watching as well as the twilight settled over the city.

"Such things tend to resolve themselves without ever playing out."

"Probably." Rikou didn't respond further.

The dusk crept into the room along with the noise of the street below. What they mused about in these flights of fancy had already occurred to most dynasties. If such things could wreak such destruction, then living an extraordinary long life was not in the cards. With the run-of-the-mill dangers surmounted, the future only became less and less certain.

Why did dynasties fail, Rikou wondered to himself. Why did a king who had received the Mandate of Heaven fall from the Way? Was it because it never occurred to himself that he really had? And if he hadn't noticed, had he ever understood what the "Way" was? Could such a person receive the Mandate of Heaven in the first place?

If not, then he surely should have known at some point. And yet he strayed. At some point, he must have realized he was heading in the wrong direction.

Based on past precedents, he could grasp at what point the mistake was made. But just as he could not imagine the moment of his own death, he couldn't imagine being consciously aware of setting down the wrong path. What was the cause that came before the effect? And how to stop it ahead of time?

Fuukan's cheerful voice suddenly broke into his thoughts. "You staying in Shisou long?"

"That was the intent, but I'm not so sure." It wasn't mere rumor anymore. If things really were getting chancy in Ryuu, then Rikou had to sound the alarm. "Maybe two or three more days. I want to check things out with my own two

eyes. And you?"

"I'll be taking off tomorrow. I took the long way around from the En border to here."

"Sounds like you. Living your life by the seat of your pants."

"You're hardly one to talk."

You and I are hardly in the same position, Rikou thought of bantering in return, but held his tongue. They were both free spirits with a love of the open road. As long as they could keep on meeting like this, it was better to keep that pretense alive.

At the same time, for all their chance meetings from the opposite ends of the world, they had never gotten together on their true own home grounds. And that's how it'd probably be the next time as well.

"Well, then. I should like to hear about your long way around getting here." Rikou grinned. "Dinner's on me."

Just as Fuukan had warned him, the food was bad and the drink no better. They wrapped things up around midnight and parted ways at the top of the stairs. Rikou wasn't in the mood to see Fuukan off the next morning. He intended to sleep in till noon. If Heaven smiled upon Sou and En, they would meet again when they least expected to.

"I don't have to tell you to take care of yourself," he said, and headed toward his room.

"Not at all," came Fuukan's voice behind him. "But let me tell you an interesting story."

Rikou stopped and leaned back against the railing.

Fuukan grinned. "I'm lousy at go. But I pull off a win now and then. When I do, I pocket one of the stones. So far I've collected around eighty."

Rikou stood there stock still. "And?"

"Well, to be precise, I got up to eighty-three. And then the whole thing struck me as silly."

Rikou laughed out loud. "And now?"

"Well, I don't remember throwing them away, so they should be sitting around somewhere."

"How long ago are we talking about?"

"Oh, about two hundred years." Fuukan grinned. With a wave he spun on his heels. "See you," he said cheerfully over his shoulder.

"Yeah, you son of a bitch!" Rikou merrily shot back.

Chapter 2

The capital of the southern Kingdom of Sou was called Ryuukou. Seikan Palace, home of the six-hundred year old dynasty built by the Royal Sou, covered the peaks of Mt. Ryuukou.

The focal point of the Imperial Palace was usually the Imperial Residence—the Seishin. But in the case of Sou, the focus was a bit off center. The center of the palace complex was instead the Koukyuu—the "palace at the back"—and specifically Tenshou Manor in the Koukyuu.

This had occurred shortly after the founding of the dynasty and for the past six hundred years had never changed.

More than occupying the peak of a mountain, Seikan Palace looked like an atoll floating in the Sea of Clouds. Many of the buildings lower down on the "islands" jutted above the clear surface of the sea. Countless bridges suspended above the water connected one terrace to another.

The Seishin was one such island and the Koukyuu another. Crossing the bridge from the Seishin and passing through the tower gate, one arrived at the foot of a small peak. Getting to Tenshou Manor, the main building in the Koukyuu, required passing through a tunnel and then climbing a stone staircase along the back of the peak a short ways to a high promontory.

A small bay could be visible from Tenshou Manor. Cliffs surrounded the bay. To the right and left, bridges suspended in the air led deeper into the Koukyuu, to the North Palace and to the East Palace.

Around sunset, the silhouette of a kijuu appeared above the clear, calm surface of the Sea of Clouds. Bathed in the glow of a waning moon, the fleeting shadow crossed the bay and headed for Tenshou Manor. It alighted on the balcony clinging to the side of the cliffs. The balcony made several switchbacks as it descended to the water's surface.

The kijuu perched on the narrow ledge jutting out behind the rear windows. The expansive hall was visible through the glass. Situated squarely in the center of the hall was a large, round table. The table was cluttered with plates and utensils, so apparently dinner had just ended. Five people were scattered around the table, sipping at their teacups.

"No surprise to find you all here," Rikou smiled, entering the room through the tall windows.

The people around the table all turned at the same time with surprised exclamations. A plump, older woman paused and took a deep breath. "You can't seem to remember where the front door is."

The woman was Queen Meiki. From the beginning, she had lived in the North Palace. Not only did she reside in the Koukyuu, but she would roll up the sleeves of her luxurious kimono with a *tasuki* sash and peel the peaches that flourished on the small peak. A sight surely no one would see anywhere else but in Sou.

"Not to mention that there's no flying kijuu around the Imperial Palace. If I've told you once I've told you a thousand times. Does everything go in one ear and out the other, my cavalier young son?"

"It must not have registered," Rikou said with a carefree smile. "Because of my advanced age, don't you see."

Meiki sighed again and shook her head. "At least your mostly-empty head remembered that you have a family. Where have you been off to this time?"

"Well—" said Rikou smiling. He took his place at the one empty seat at the table. "Here and there."

"Meaning you made another one of your circumnavigations. You leave a person speechless."

"Though you, dear mother, are not at a loss for words."

"You can consider this a reprimand. And try to keep that in mind for the next time."

"I can't promise for sure that it'll stick in there."

"Mother—" said Prince Eisei Ritatsu, Rikou's older brother, with an even bigger

sigh. "Let fools do what fools do best. When you pay so much attention to him, it all goes to his head."

"Hey, don't be mean," said the grinning Princess Bun, Rikou's kid sister (her official name was Bun Koushu). "Our dear brother came home in order to hear our dear mother's scoldings. He's such a mama's boy."

"Hey, hey."

"But Rikou, you're in such a jolly good mood right now. It's always like this. You should take a look in a mirror."

"Hmm," said Rikou, stroking his jowls.

"In any case," softly interjected a girl with golden hair, "it's good to see you home in one piece."

The girl's name was Sourin. Her given name was Shoushou.

Rikou said with an exaggerated nod, "As always, Shoushou alone is concerned for my well being."

"That's because Shoushou is a kirin," said Bunki.

Ritatsu agreed. "It's her natural benevolence rising to the fore."

"Shoushou would be concerned for the worst villain in the world," said Meiki, piling on as well.

Rikou smiled grimly and leaned back in his chair.

"And then—" the head of the family, the Royal Sou Senshin, said encouragingly. He put his utensils down on the serving table and poured a cup of tea and offered it to him. Nowhere else but in Sou would such a scene ever been seen. "How is the world doing? Here and there?"

"Things aren't looking good in Ryuu."

Senshin's teacup hit the table with an audible thump. "Ryuu—"

Ritatsu furrowed his brows. He put down his pen and pushed the papers off to the side. "Again? The same old wheel keeps spinning round and round."

"Are you sure about that?" Senshin asked.

Rikou nodded. "From what I could see, it sure seemed that way to me. There are reports of youma appearing on the coasts of Ryuu facing the Kyokai. It seems limited to the coasts facing Tai, so many believe that these are merely youma being blown off course. But unless the Divine Will is being undermined, they would never stray so close. En is posting guards along the border."

"Huh," grunted Ritatsu. "If a smart guy like that is mustering the Minister of Summer into action, then it really must be serious."

Bunki sighed. "The Royal En is in a tough place too. Tai is in bad enough straits that youma are wandering about, and Kei isn't exactly stable. And Ryuu on top of that."

"And Kou as well. Crossing the Blue Sea, you can see the refugees streaming toward En."

"How's Kou faring?"

"Bad as usual. The sea lanes from the Red Sea to the Blue Sea are completely shut down. The youma have rendered the Sonkai Gate impassable. What in the world did the Royal Kou do? The Hakuchi has only recently fallen, and yet the place is thick with youma. And as a result—" Ritatsu cast a distasteful look at the papers he'd pushed to the side. "Things are getting a bit hectic, what with all the refugees thronging here. It's time you put on leash on that free spirit of yours and took charge of refugee relief."

"Isn't that more Bunki's department?"

"I have my responsibilities at the Hosui Havens."

Sou had sanctuaries—called "Hosui Havens"—set up across the kingdom for refugees and the homeless. Bunki had long served as the executive director, or "Taisui."

When setting up special Imperial positions not expressly defined in the law, it would always be run by a member of the royal family. Rather than simply appointing a minister to the position, the best way to insure a good outcome and put the people's minds at ease was to put a crown prince or princess royal in charge, even if serving only in an honorary capacity.

Despite knowing that Bunki was serving nominally as the "Taisui," having the

princess royal as the executive director was broadly taken to mean that the king himself had a personal interest in making sure things got done right. That meant they could put their trust in the project.

Though in fact the king had nothing really to do with it. Bunki acted as Taisui with all the authority of the Royal Sou. She would go through the motions of compiling the opinions of the bureaucrats and presenting them to Senshin, just as Senshin would go through the motions of rendering decisions.

But Bunki did not require his yea or nay on every decision. She had piles of blank authorizations bearing his Imperial Seal. And in any case, they could forge each other's handwriting, a talent they'd refined over the past six hundred years.

Ritatsu took a deep breath and let it out. "The Hosui Havens won't be enough by themselves. The refugees are fleeing with the barest necessities. For them, just making it over the border will have pretty much exhausted their resources. And since they'll mostly want to go home once things begin to settle down in their home kingdoms, they are setting up villages in the vicinity of the Koushuu Mountains. But in fact it's as good as them being abandoned there."

"Is somebody from the Hosui Havens there to meet them?"

"There is," said Bunki. "But we simply can't keep up."

Meiki nodded. "We need to organize the refugees, treat them as our guests. At the bare minimum, incorporate these villages in some kind of systematic way."

"As things stand now," Ritatsu pointed out, "you're the only one not carrying his own weight. Time to quit holding out and lend a hand."

Rikou sighed. "Sounds like I don't have a choice."

"Start giving me the old run-around and I'll kick your butt out the door. It's up to you."

"When I get involved in something, I end up spending money hand over fist."

"That's hardly news to anybody."

"Procuring and transporting supplies?"

"We've pretty much decided that once you've exhausted the emergency stores maintained in the county seats, we'll go back to the drawing boards."

"Well, then. Let's give it a try."

"Prepare some firm policy objectives, even if in rough form. The sooner the better."

"I'll get right on it."

"Goodness gracious," Senshin said, exhaling noticeably. "The Royal En is handling his end of things by himself? I take my hat off to him."

"Because the ministers in En have got talent and drive," said Ritatsu. He scowled. "While ours spend half the days resting on their laurels."

"As far as that goes, even if a bad thought crosses their minds, they're too lazy to act on it. Everything balances out at the end of the day."

Meiki grinned slyly and the whole family laughed.

"Well," Senshi smiled, "to each his own. And how is everybody else doing?"

Rikou shrugged. "Tai is in a bad way. I went to the general vicinity to get a closer look, but there was nothing to see. The Kyokai is completely infested with youma."

Bunki asked curiously, "But the Hakuchi hasn't died, has it? It seems that something must have happened to the Royal Tai."

"And we haven't the slightest idea what. From putting the bits and pieces of gossip together, the only conclusion is that a pretender has taken the throne."

"Even though the Royal Tai appears to be alive?"

"Strange goings-on, to be sure. There's no talk of the Taiki being struck down with the shitsudou, no word of the king's death. This points to an internal rebellion. But such a rebellion should not be enough to bring out so many rampaging youma."

"The two situations do seem similar," suggested Shoushou.

"The two seem similar?"

"Yes. Kou and Tai. The Royal Kou died soon after Kourin succumbed to the shitsudou. That by itself is not unusual. But that it occurred in such quick fashion is almost unprecedented."

"Indeed," said Meiki, dividing up the peeled peaches onto several plates. "But hopefully nothing funny is going on with the youma themselves."

"With the youma?"

"Strange things are afoot, are they not? Either strange things going on in Tai and Kou, or strange things going on with the youma causing them to flock there. We can't really know without the matter being settled one way or the other."

"Don't go there, Mom," Ritatsu stated crisply. He glared at Rikou. "Say something like that, and a certain *somebody* will be just chomping at the bit to go take a look. Rikou, you're getting antsy just sitting there."

"Because I have shouldered a great responsibility. Nothing more than that."

"And don't you forget it."

"Can't promise that I will," Rikou answered with a sly grin.

Senshin asked, "There's one other kingdom I'm concerned about. How is Hou?"

"Nothing more than what would be expected. Slowly sinking beneath the waves. But doing so in as fine a form as could be expected. That provisional court shows real promise."

"And the rest?"

"The rest are getting by. Shun hit a few uneven spots recently, but it's a young dynasty with only forty years under her belt, so they may just be working out the kinks. While it's hard to say how the dice will roll, I have the feeling that they're heading in the right direction. Han is approaching a big turning point. But like they'd been there and done that, they're proceeding on as usual."

"What about Kei? Has it settled down?"

"Ah," said Rikou with a smile. "Yes, Kei."

"How's that?" Bunki inquired. "Doesn't Kei have an empress?"

"They do. Kei and empresses have gotten along like oil and water. But it looks like they didn't roll snake-eyes for once. The Imperial Rescript was just published. It abolished kowtowing."

"What?" everybody said in a collective expression of surprise.

"Abolished kowtowing? What exactly does that mean?"

Bunki said, "Surely you jest. Everybody just bows standing up? Like the kirin?"

Rikou nodded. "That about sums it up."

"What's that supposed to accomplish?"

"Well, nothing practical, to be sure. However, I think the intent is clear. She's the first monarch to tell her subjects: *Don't prostrate yourselves before me.*"

"You've got a point there."

"Before the Imperial Rescript was issued, there was a bit of trouble in one of Kei's central provinces. The Royal Kei reportedly got directly involved in the conflict and pacified the situation."

"Good heavens!" Bunki brought her hand to her mouth.

"She also put the screws to the gang that for decades had led the Imperial Court around by the nose. All the ministries were reorganized. It looks like this girl knows how to get things done. Pretty remarkable for an empress of Kei."

"Indeed."

"Since the Imperial Rescript, the reforms have proceeded at a respectable pace. The prejudicial laws against hanjuu and kaikyaku were abolished by imperial edict. Believe it or not, the general of the Palace Guard is a hanjuu."

"That really is impressive."

"*It's about time*, might be the more appropriate reaction."

"You don't think it's impressive that the Royal Kei should make such changes by imperial edict? Nothing like that has happened there for a very long time."

Rikou smiled. "Yes, the status quo is getting stirred up in Kei. It's a good feeling."

He still harbored some doubts about this flurry of activity in Kei, and about the strength of their new empress. But the closer he'd gotten to the capital, the more energized the people appeared. This was evidence that confidence and hope was radiating from her presence outward. The kingdom had been visited and revisited by strife and rebellion. The bureaucracy had hardened like stone.

And yet he sensed an energy there that could knock them out of their set ways like a sledgehammer.

Kei would make it past the ten-year mark, and in good shape.

Ritatsu sighed. "Well, we can all be thankful that Kei is settling down. There is unrest on the home front that keeps me up at night. Perhaps Kei presents us with an example worth following. Not a few places here stand in need of improvement."

"Are you trying to tell me something?"

"Well, according to your own accounting, you do seem to growing a bit senile."

"Yes, yes," Rikou answered with a self-deprecating grin.

The room grew quiet as the people seated around the round table sank into collective contemplation.

Senshin broke the silence. "How is Ryuu actually holding up?"

Rikou had to think about it for a minute. "Hard to say. My guess is that once things come to a head, the situation will resolve itself quickly one way or another. Things are bad enough that youma are showing up. The Divine Will is definitely wavering. It is entirely possible that the shitsudou will strike down the Taiho any day now."

"When it comes to Ryuu, we don't have to get involved, do we? We should be able to count on En and Kyou for that."

"En has already got a handle on things, so I don't think we need to worry."

"But aren't they already accepting refugees from Tai, Kei and Kou? Things are improving in Kei, but they're still not ready to go it on their own. Tai is a complete mess and En is taking the full brunt. Add to that the refugees on Kou's northern borders who will make a beeline for En as their first alternative. They're not going to risk crossing youma-infested territory in order to get to Sou. But supporting Kou, and on top of that, supporting Ryuu when things start getting rough there is asking an awful lot of them. I suppose it would be rude of us to offer aid."

"Well, I wouldn't go that far," Rikou smiled. "Rather, it might be better to think

about ways to accept more refugees from Kou. We'd actually be taking the pressure off Kei, seeing that Kei hardly has the resources to support them these days."

Senshin grunted in agreement. "The problem is, how to get the Kou refugees to Sou?"

"We could transport them by sea," suggested Ritatsu, making a note. Writing with one hand, he raised the other and added, "Going from the Red Sea to the Blue Sea is problematic. For the time being, we can maximize the number of ships putting into harbor on the Red Sea coast, and after that use the Kyokai to send ships to pick up refugees moving north up the Kou coast."

"There aren't any good harbors on the Kyokai, are there?"

Expecting the question, Rikou nodded. "There are only two harbors big enough for large ships. But quite a few capable of handling fishing trawlers."

"Then small is the way to go. That way they can dock at the fishing ports too. In any case, we couldn't get enough larger ships out of dry dock in time. We don't have enough ships now, so we'll have to build more. Trawlers don't make the best ferries, but combined into a fleet, we can drastically increase the number of routes."

"Hmm, I hadn't thought of that," agreed Meiki. "Let's do it. If we build a lot of big ships in a hurry, we'd eventually end up with no way to use them. At least fishing trawlers can be sold to fishermen once we're done with them. Traveling up the Kyokai and gathering refugees from the north of Kou will relieve the pressure on Kei."

"Indeed. The rest of the problem then becomes Kyou's," said Ritatsu, looking up at Rikou.

"I dropped by Kyou on my way home. I told them that storm clouds were brewing."

"What's the logistical situation in Kyou?"

"They've set aside emergency stores to deal with Hou. In an emergency, those can be diverted to aid refugees from Ryuu. Contrary to expectations, Ryuu seems to be hanging in there. But if things were to take a turn for the worse and not

resolve themselves quickly enough, the situation could grow dire."

Bunki sighed. "Kyou can't carry Hou and Ryuu by herself. In particular, Hou has a geographical dependency on Kyou. Does Kyou have friendly relations with Han next door?"

"I don't think so."

"Then it'd probably be a good idea to think about providing Kyou some aid. At least to ensure a minimal amount of food stores."

"That wouldn't work, Bunki." Meiki smiled. "Think about the time and labor and money required to transport it. Rather than providing food stores ourselves, it'd be more efficient to augment Kyou's Imperial Treasury directly. Besides, if we're bringing refugees from Kou, we're going to have to call on our food reserves. On top of that, if we try to purchase rice on the open market in order to ship it to Kyou, commodity prices will go through the roof."

"You are probably right about that."

"The best course might be to warn the Royal Kyou to monitor the price of grain. That and lumber. It's one of the main exports in Kyou, Hou and Ryuu, isn't it? If two of those kingdoms start to falter, prices will shoot up. Grain or lumber, loosening up supplies here so surpluses can flow north would likely prove the most efficient strategy."

"But—" Bunki started to say.

Senshin interrupted her. "What your mother is saying is correct. Sending actual matériel would not be good. People take that kind of thing personally. They feel they're being robbed of their ability to take independent action. As far as the refugees are concerned, the most important thing for them is to persevere and not lose hope. That's what we can provide."

"Ah—true—"

"We have a duty to help out where we can. But once we've helped that person to his feet, we also have a duty to let go. I think that assisting Kyou through her Imperial Treasury so she can direct aid to the refugees is a good idea. But Kyou should be the one directing the aid. A neighboring kingdom handing out assistance will reassure the citizens of Ryuu, who will in the future feel a sense of

obligation. That would be just as true if Sou were providing the aid, but with Kyou, they will be in a much better position to return the favor because of the geography. Whatever Sou did would likely never be repaid. A debt that cannot be repaid is little different from a handout. Getting refugees accustomed to such a relationship would break that which is most important to them."

Bunki nodded. Senshin smiled and turned to Rikou. "The same applies to you. I don't so much mind you spending your way through the Imperial Treasury on behalf of the people of Kou, as long you keep in mind that it's possible to be charitable to a fault."

"I understand."

Senshin sighed. "Well, wherever you go, you manage to bring home the news of the world. It's much appreciated."

"Don't encourage him, Father," Ritatsu interjected. "When it comes to Rikou, it'd be better to encourage a little self-reflection than letting him bask in praise."

"You don't need to keep beating that drum. I'm committed to the refugee problem."

"And we'll hold you to it. Count on having your feet held to the fire."

"I figured as much."

"And you can start," said the scowling Ritatsu, "by getting off your butt and stablizing your kijuu. How much longer are you going to make it wait out there?"

Smiling at the chagrined Rikou, Shoushou got to her feet. "I'll—"

"That's fine, Shoushou," Meiki said crisply. "People who make messes should at least learn to clean up after them. Goodness gracious, you're not children anymore."

At this, everybody burst out laughing.

"That's for certain."

"Yeah, it's about bloody time our brother became an adult."

"There's nothing funny about a six-hundred year old child."

Grinning as well, Rikou bobbed his head. "Yes, yes, yes." He got up and went to

the window. Stepping through the window onto the ledge he thought to himself: *They're all exactly the same as when I left.*

They'd always be here, the light burning in the window, and those bright faces gathered around the table in warm harmony. Returning from his journeys to find that scene waiting for him filled him with a sense of relief. For good or ill, he hadn't tired of the idle life of the bourgeois.

Or perhaps he left home and wandered about the Twelve Kingdoms—even knowing of the dangers that awaited him—*because* he had grown tired of it. In fact, whenever he left he did so with no thought as to where he would go or when he would return. Sou and Seikan Palace and his family were the furthest things from his thoughts.

Deep down in the recesses of his mind, he might even contemplate leaving and never coming home.

But he always came back. In time, the other kingdoms turned desolate and cold. Kingdoms were fragile things. No matter how firm the ground might feel underfoot, the people were always standing on thin ice.

No dynasty lasted forever. That fact was all too self-evident.

Here, though, and now, the world was all right. And it'd be all right as long as *they* were there to hold each other up and watch each other's backs.

Rikou glanced over his shoulder. This was probably why he always came home again. To make certain that much was still true.